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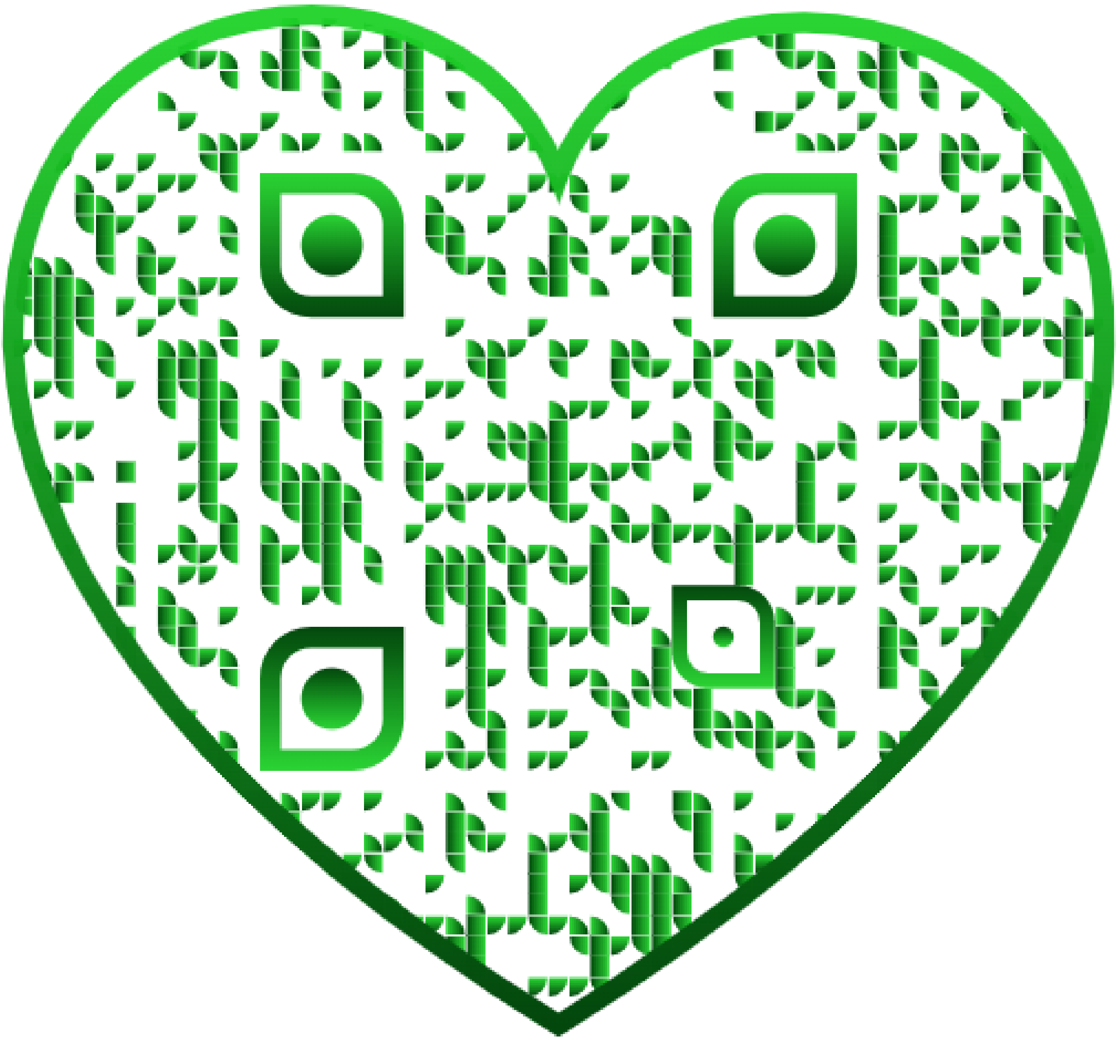

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ISSN 0967-1870

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This publication is printed
by Warners Midlands PLC
Telephone: **01778 391000**

ADVISORY PANEL
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COVER PHOTOS: BAIKAL TEAL BY CARLOS BOCOS; SCARLET TANAGER BY MIKA BRUUN; SLAVONIAN GREBE BY OLIVER SMART

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ROSS'S GULL IN DORSET BY GRAHAM JEPSON

I'D like to wish *Birdwatch* readers a Happy New Year. Have you set yourself any birding goals for 2025? Perhaps it's a year-list target or a green birding challenge – it'd be great to hear what you've got planned. Personally, after a big year-list effort in 2024 that saw me pass 200 species in my local area, I'm looking forward to a more relaxed 12 months ahead with a view to targeting potential rare breeders that may (or may not!) reside unseen locally. Eurasian Goshawk, European Honey Buzzard and Hawfinch are among those that will be on the agenda – I'll be revisiting the Field ID Notes articles that we've published on these species over the past couple of years to stand me in good stead.

Which leads me on to this month's ID feature, focusing on grebes. A local highlight for me towards the end of 2024 was the arrival of two Slavonian Grebes on my patch. In one of those peculiar quirks that birding has a habit of throwing up, the grebes' arrival transpired to be 19 years to the day since my previous patch record of the species. These birds are increasingly scarce at inland sites, but if we get a cold snap this month then be sure to keep an eye on your local waterbodies (see pages 34-38).

One species I never anticipate seeing on my inland patch, however, is Ross's Gull. There are some rarities that birders never forget encountering and I would say that this is one of them. It's a gull, yes, but one that embodies elegance and mystery. As Ed Stubbs rightly says (pages 22-25), it's difficult to imagine such a dainty bird being hardy enough to survive the Arctic winter, yet that's exactly what Ross's Gull does. Only rarely do birds venture further south, where they are invariably celebrated as rare treats. Over the years I've seen two in Ireland and one in Britain, and I've enjoyed every minute of every encounter. I'm sure many readers can relate to that!

Josh Jones

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ACCOMPANYING digital content for this month's issue can be found on the BirdGuides website, including:

- Video of Ross's Gull;
- Film of November 2024's rarest birds;
- Footage of winter grebes;
- Video of Baikal Teal.

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GOLDFINCH BY KIT DAY

MAIN IMAGE: IAN LYCETT; INSET: DAVID COTTRIDGE

Golden-era warbler

On Tuesday 7 February 1989, news of Britain's first Golden-winged Warbler in the village of Larkfield, near Maidstone in Kent, sparked perhaps the most famous – and maybe largest – twitch in British birding history. The bird had been seen that day by Paul Doherty who was conducting his postal round, though it later transpired that the Miller family, who lived on the Lunsford Park estate, had seen the warbler in their garden from 24 January.

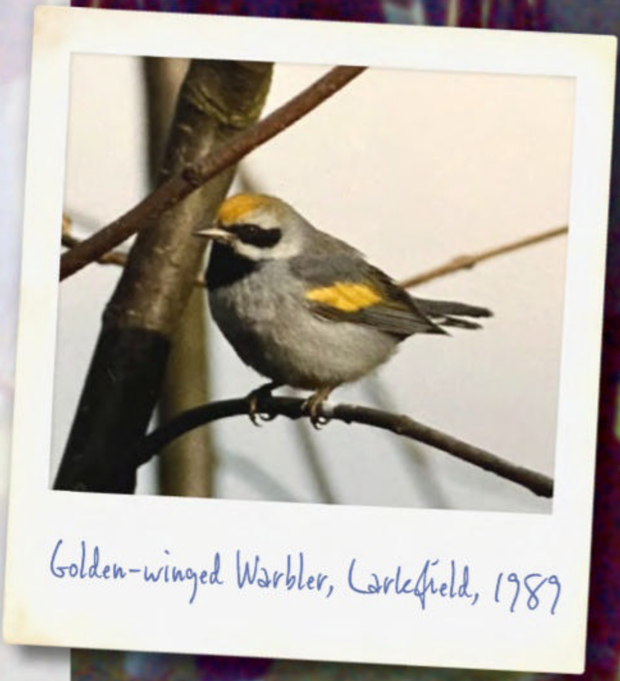
After Doherty's shock discovery on 7th, he went back with a handful of birders to confirm the sighting the following day. The warbler, a male, eventually gave itself up in the afternoon and, after a message was put out on Birdline – the bird news service of choice in the late 1980s – the rest became history.

In the following days, the bird roved around the edge of the housing estate and, somewhat incongruously, the bushes surrounding the nearby Tesco car park. It was widely twitched in the week, but the number of birders who visited over the weekend surpassed expectations. Rough estimates for Saturday 11th suggest a remarkable 3,000 people were on site, with a further 1,200 on the Sunday. Despite the enormous gatherings, most local people enjoyed their area being in the spotlight, with the presence of print and television reporters adding to the intrigue.

Birdwatch's Ian Lycett was one of those birders in the crowd that Saturday and recounts: "Our carload arrived early. We hung around the Tesco car park for ages, with a lone Waxwing for entertainment. There was no sign of the main prize, so we decided to warm up in the supermarket café. The last mouthful of bacon was being consumed when there was a commotion in the car park as hundreds of birders started running.

"Those in the café leapt into action, scattering half-finished plates. We ran to the housing estate, took a right turn and another 400-m dash ensued. A pause was followed by another right turn and run – and we were back at Tesco! A shout from back up the street saw us retrace our steps into the estate, massing to look along a garden fence. A short wait followed before the warbler hopped into view."

The bird lingered until April and was reported to be heard singing on milder days leading up to its departure. Fittingly, the last person to see it was Doherty himself, when he noted it in bushes at Tesco on 10 April. There has not been another British record of this stunning North American warbler since and, incredibly, there has only been one other in the Western Palearctic – a male on Corvo, Azores, in October 2012. ■

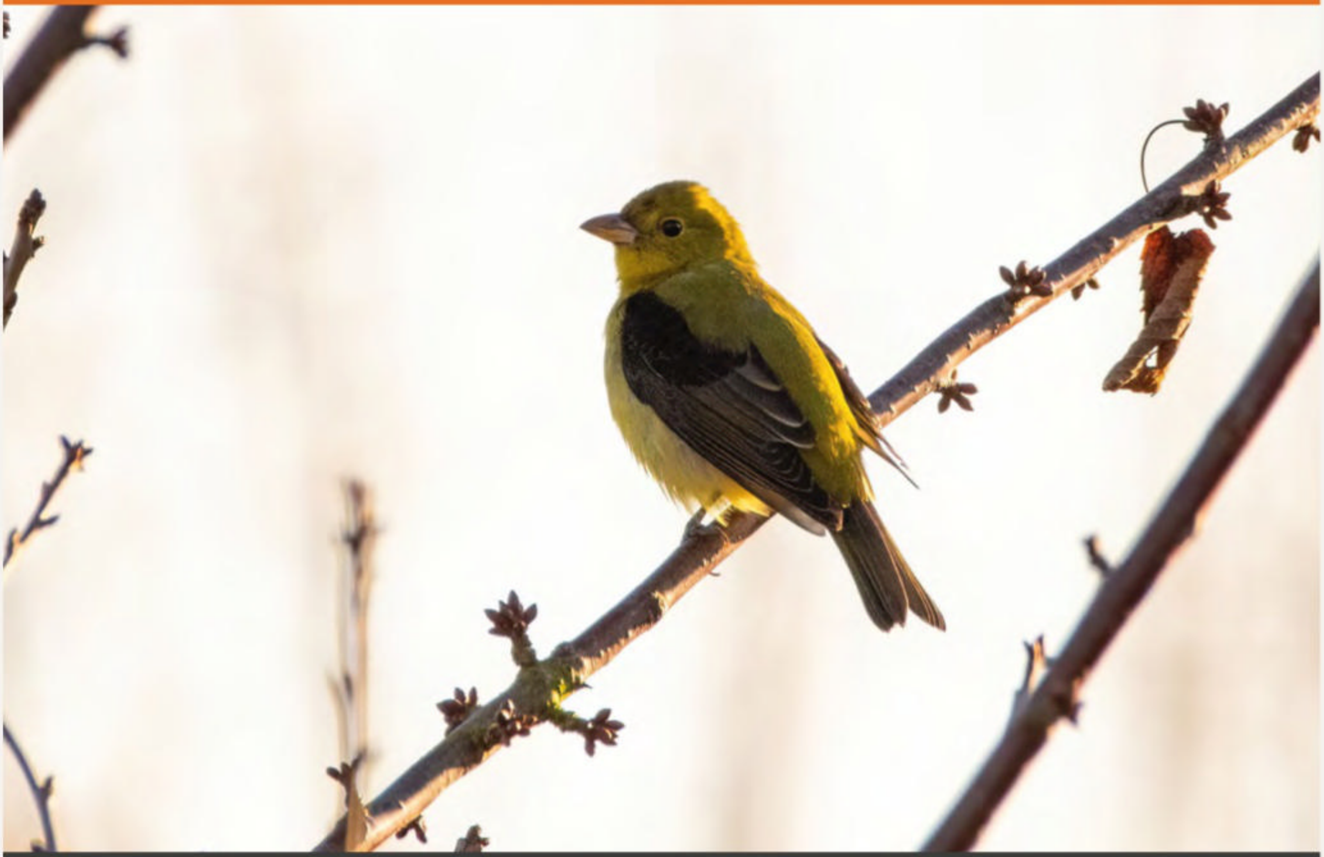


Golden-winged Warbler, Larkfield, 1989

FINDER'S REPORT

Scarlet Tanager: Shelf, West Yorkshire, 9-13 November 2024

HEP CAIRNSWOOD



The first-winter male Scarlet Tanager at Shelf represented the first record for Yorkshire of this North American breeder. The last British record came a decade ago on Barra, Outer Hebrides, and involved a first-winter female from 6-9 October that was also trapped and ringed.

Scarlet sensation

Martin Dove's extraordinary garden visitor sparked a mass twitch to a small village on the outskirts of Halifax in early November.

EARLY on Saturday 9 November, as I sat in my conservatory, a strange bright yellow bird caught my eye. I didn't have time to look at it properly, however.

It was forgotten about until the next morning when the bird was again flitting around the garden. It was solitary and immediately stood out due to its vibrant yellow plumage and unusual, quick movements. It reminded me of a flycatcher, darting from one tree or shrub to another, but always staying within the confines of the garden. As I watched it, I began to notice other features, including the black legs, black wings and a pinkish bill.

I am familiar with British birds and knew that it was something unusual. My daughter, Joanne, came over a short while later and was equally curious about what the garden visitor might be.

By sheer luck, the bird almost immediately landed on our washing line, only a few metres from the side of the conservatory. Joanne instantly grabbed her phone and took a series of photographs of the strange garden visitor. From these, we suspected that it might be an unusual vagrant from North America, perhaps a female or immature Scarlet Tanager or American Goldfinch.

Joanne was confident that someone on the internet might know what it was and took to Facebook, posting the images on a group of more than 50,000 members called 'Dull Men's Club – UK Chapter'. Several comments were supportive of the bird being a Scarlet Tanager. This came as a bit of a shock!

A few members suggested that we should let the BTO know about our garden visitor and pointed us towards BirdTrack. Later that evening, Sam Viles from BirdGuides messaged agreeing with the identification. He informed us that it was only the eighth record for Britain and the first for Yorkshire. Learning that it was a mega rarity from North America, I had visions of millions of twitchers with big lenses turning up outside.

I was back at work on Monday and missed out on most of the excitement, but our neighbours on the street behind received hundreds of birders hoping to catch sight of the Scarlet Tanager. Some opened up their gardens to twitchers or brought out cups of tea to raise money for BBC Children in Need. The twitch was a great success. ■

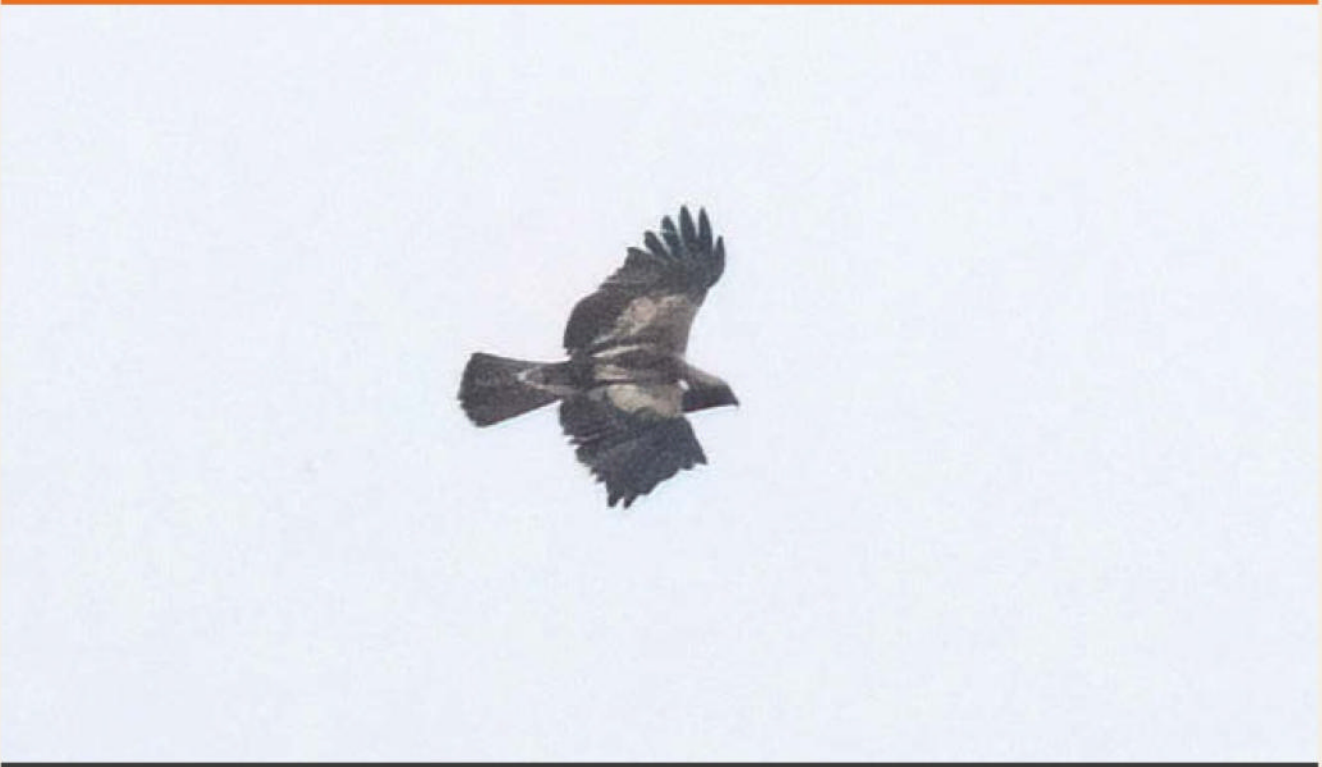
IAN LYCETT

The Scarlet Tanager drew enormous crowds of birders to an unassuming West Yorkshire suburb during its five-day stay.

FINDER'S REPORT

Booted Eagle: multiple sites in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, 31 October-2 November 2024

SAM VILES



This dark-morph Booted Eagle represented an extraordinary find in the poorly birded Chilterns in southern England. It seems likely that this individual is the same as that seen in Cornwall during the spring (see *Birdwatch* 385: 8-9), which was first noted among a Red Kite movement.

Eagle in the hills

On a work volunteer party and without a camera, *Alan Lewis* was in for a shock when he discovered an extremely rare raptor in late October.

I work for a large engineering company and we are allowed to use a few days each year to support 'social value' activities. One of my colleagues had previously volunteered at Warburg NR in Oxfordshire, so knew we could arrange a day there. After exchanging emails with the warden, the date was agreed as 31 October.

It was a beautiful, sunny day and, just after 10 am, an hour or so into scrub clearance work, I walked back to my rucksack for a drink. As I took a swig, I looked up to see a few Red Kites drifting overhead when I noticed a smaller, very dark raptor join the group. It didn't have the jizz of a Common Buzzard and seemed too uniformly dark, so I grabbed my bins.

The light was perfect and I could see that the raptor was approximately 80% the size of the kites. It was square-tailed with smooth chocolate-brown underparts, had a paler window on the inner primaries and a straw-coloured nape. It wasn't a Western Marsh Harrier or a Black Kite … this looked like a dark-morph Booted Eagle! Panic – I had no camera! Several of my non-birding colleagues saw the bird and agreed it wasn't a buzzard, but had never heard of Booted Eagle so were of limited help in the identification.

The bird dropped below the treeline on the ridge but reappeared after a short while, a little more distant this time but still in perfect light. It circled with three kites and banked, and for the first time I saw the upperparts, which showed a large pale covert bar, broad pale tramlines down the back and a narrow white rump patch – it was definitely a Booted Eagle!

I made a failed attempt to 'digi-bin' the bird and then took a few futile pictures with my phone, but the only images secured were of a few blobs. The bird drifted off south along the ridge.

The dark-morph Booted Eagle in Cornwall in May 2024 was the first to be photographed here since the pale morph that was present in Ireland and then Britain between February 1999 and June 2000; that record still languishes in Category D of the British list. In the 24 years since, Booted Eagle has been claimed in Britain on no fewer than 31 further occasions, with 11 of them strong, but none have been photographed and considered acceptable.

Against this background, I was insistent that the news couldn't be released without photographic evidence. Who wants to be associated with a record of a fly-over rarity, particularly a Booted Eagle, without tangible proof?

That evening it was agreed to share the news with legendary bird-finder Chris Heard, who lives nearby. Quite remarkably, by late morning on Friday 1 November, he had relocated it – refinding the eagle some 6 km away at Remenham Hill in the far north of his home county of Berkshire.

Some of Britain's keenest twitchers were in the area by early morning on Saturday 2 November. After having already scouted the wider area, Dan Pointon and Al Orton headed back to Remenham Hill and, at 9.33 am, Dan picked up the eagle circling with kites.

Dan's message on the WhatsApp group set in motion a frantic two hours in which the bird showed on and off between Remenham and Henley, with birders scrambling to find good vantage points. Importantly, several birders had secured the all-important photographic evidence. Phew!

There was no sign of the eagle on Saturday afternoon or Sunday, with colder and overcast weather, despite the efforts of many would-be observers.

The Chilterns bird is very likely to be the dark morph seen in Cornwall in May 2024, which was noted with the annual Red Kite influx into that county and has tagged onto a group of kites as they returned to the Chilterns. The latter area is so underwatched it seems possible that it could have been there all summer. ■

Rarities and scarcities: November 2024

GARY WOODBURN

The late, great show

There were plenty of late autumn surprises this year, while early winter storms produced some lively birding as well. *Sam Viles* summarises the highlights.

A satirical quip that has started doing the rounds in recent years states that 'November is the new October'. Legitimate or not, it cannot be ignored that autumn seems to get later every year and November now reliably produces major national rarities on an annual basis.

Late autumn megas

The sleepy West Yorkshire village of Shelf was the location for one of the most out-of-place vagrants of the year, hosting a five-day Scarlet Tanager mid-month (see page 8). Attracting media attention from as far afield as Australia and Canada, the bird's presence sparked a huge twitch, with few perturbed by spirited social-media debate regarding the status of Scarlet Tanager in captivity.

North Ronaldsay's excellent autumn continued in style with a first-winter Eyebrowed Thrush from 7-9th. The island has enjoyed a special affinity with the species in recent years, with this becoming the fourth island record – and all having occurred since 2009. Orkney's first Brown Booby flew north-west on 8th during an impromptu North Ronaldsay seawatch, with a *Pterodroma* passing on 2nd.

Raptor sensations

The first twitchable Booted Eagle since 1999 finally fell at the start of the month. The dark morph found in late October was relocated at the border of Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire early on 1st (see page 9), with a few tens of eager twitchers lucking in as it performed in the vicinity on a number of occasions the next morning.

A presumed pale-morph juvenile Rough-legged Hawk near Sennen, Cornwall, from 3-9th followed a noticeable autumn influx into the Azores and Western Europe (including a probable in Northern Ireland at the end of October). Features immediately apparent in the Cornish bird that are a better fit for the Nearctic *sanctijohannis* subspecies than Eurasian *lagopus* include a warm upper breast and restricted white rump patch, the latter caused by the distal tail band bleeding towards the uppertail. Further supporting features include the details in the median coverts, uppertail colouration and a lack of uppertail barring. A juvenile Rough-legged Buzzard flying over the Amur Stonechat twitch at Trimley Marshes, Suffolk, and one at Danby Beacon, North Yorkshire, were the only other November records of this increasingly scarce species.

In Co Cork, a second-winter male Northern Harrier roosting at Ballyvergan Marsh from 10th was joined by a juvenile Pallid Harrier from 14th. It seems possible that the Northern Harrier is one of the two seen at Tacumshin, Co Wexford, earlier this autumn. A presumed juvenile male Northern Harrier was tracked along the Lincolnshire coast from Gibraltar Point to Mablethorpe on 13th and a new Pallid Harrier was in Devon, with others lingering in Norfolk and Pembrokeshire. A Black Kite was in Norfolk.

Shetland on song

A late push of Nearctic waterbirds treated Shetlanders to the greatest share of the spoils, starting with the discovery of a sublime adult drake Bufflehead on Foula from 17th – a second for Shetland after one that wintered on Unst in 2006-07. Three coots at Loch of Spiggie, Mainland, on 26th consisted of two Eurasian Coots and Britain's 10th American Coot. It is Shetland's second after a bird returned for three winters from 2003-04. The immature drake White-winged Scoter resurfaced off Linga on 5th, with others persisting in Angus, Lothian and Co Kerry.

A new Yorkshire record count of Ring-necked Duck was made with five at Anglers CP, West Yorkshire, on 16th. Nine at Lough Gara, Co Sligo, was the largest flock among a further 60 elsewhere in

Facing page: Towards the end of November, chilly north-westerly winds resulted in a decent flurry of Little Auks in northern and eastern areas.

MADDY HINE

North Ronaldsay has enjoyed a brilliant autumn. This first-winter Eyebrowed Thrush, which was present from 7-9th, was one of November's highlights on the island, with a Brown Booby also seen.

Britain and Ireland. Lesser Scaup consisted of seven in Ireland, four in Scotland and three in England. The Essex Canvasback lingered, as did a drake Blue-winged Teal at Tacumshin.

In Wales, last winter's American Wigeon – a distinctive 'Storm Wigeon' variant with an extensively pale golden-white face pattern – visited Rhyl, Flintshire, on 10-11th, while a first-winter drake at Kenfig Pool, Glamorgan, became the county's first since 2006. A further 10 drakes were split between England and Scotland; one in Co Tipperary was the only Irish record.

A striking drake American Black Duck × Mallard hybrid was on Benbecula, Outer Hebrides, with the long-staying drake American Black Duck still in Co Mayo. A surprising West Midlands first came in the form of a Green-winged Teal at Marsh Lane NR on 6th – though the record comes as the taxon is set to be re-lumped with Eurasian Teal in early 2025 as part of a major restructuring of world bird taxonomy. It was one of 28 seen in Britain and Ireland this month.

Ferruginous Duck continued to cause head scratching in November. No fewer than three were found along the Colne Valley in Hertfordshire, following a suspiciously tame first-winter female found at a London park and a further five elsewhere in England, including two in Warwickshire. Quite what the rarities committee will make of the glut of recent records remains to be seen.

The Lothian Stejneger's Scoter was reported again on 4th and the Surf Scoter split saw 17 in Britain and 13 in Ireland. These included a popular quartet off Northumberland. A Pacific Diver was off Co Clare and the apparent Holboell's Red-necked Grebe remained in Dorset, while 10 White-billed Divers included notable Cornish and Pembrokeshire records.

Unshackled geese

A family party of seven Lesser White-fronted Geese (four adults and three juveniles) that arrived in off the North Sea at Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, on 9th transpired to originate from the Swedish reintroduction scheme, with one of the adults released as a juvenile male in Swedish Lapland in July 2018. The birds typically winter in the Netherlands – where the family party was reported as recently as 7 October. Remaining until the month's end, they left birders in a 'tick or no tick' quandary as, despite being regularly counted by Swedish and Dutch birders alike, they appear destined for Category E on the British list due to the Swedish population not yet being deemed self-sustaining. The arrival of a family of these globally threatened birds in Yorkshire is without doubt something to be celebrated, however.

A single Taiga Bean Goose was in England, joining Greylag Geese at Hay-a-Park GP, North Yorkshire, from 11-15th. Six Tundra Bean Geese in Yorkshire was the largest group noted. England's first double-figure flock of Greenland White-fronted Geese since 2018 roamed the marshes of Cheshire and Greater Manchester.

An eclectic mix of vagrant geese at Dunfanaghy, Co Donegal, consisted of two Cackling Geese and singles of Todd's Canada and Snow Geese. Another Cackling Goose was on Islay, Argyll, with additional Todd's Canadas in Cumbria, Co Donegal and Co Mayo. Up to seven Snow Geese – some of uncertain origin – were spread across England and Scotland. The Ayrshire Ross's Goose and Islay Red-breasted Goose both continued, while Black Brant and Grey-bellied Brant numbered three apiece.

REBECCA NASON

Loch of Spiggie in Shetland hosted this American Coot (left), which was present alongside two Eurasian Coots from 26th. It marked only the 10th British record and was the second for the archipelago.

Storm season

The penultimate week of November saw brisk north-westerly winds deliver ice and snow to much of Britain and Ireland – conditions that are traditionally a sure-fire producer of Little Auk passage. Birds were widespread along the entire east coast as far south as Kent, with small numbers along the English Channel coast all the way to Scilly. Annstead Point, Northumberland, boasted a high count of 922 in seven hours on 19th. These were accompanied by a handful of Leach's Storm Petrels, Grey Phalaropes, and Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.

Shetland's record Great Shearwater count was smashed when 65 flew north past Skaw, Unst, in three hours on 17th. Unprecedented numbers remained offshore, with more than 6,000 off Coll, Argyll, and at least 2,000 off Mullaghmore, Co Sligo. Equally unseasonal were 30 Cory's Shearwaters lingering off Scilly, with ones and twos recorded elsewhere.

Best of the rest

The late-autumn rush of White-rumped Sandpipers showed no

❯

signs of slowing, with a prolific spell producing 18 new birds from an overall total of 26. On Scilly, one of the Wilson's Snipe last seen on 13 October reappeared at Lower Moors, St Mary's, on 5-6th. Elsewhere were 15 American Golden Plovers, six Long-billed Dowitchers, three Lesser Yellowlegs, two Pectoral Sandpipers and the Spotted Sandpiper in Fife. Kentish Plovers consisted of birds in Devon and Somerset, while a Black-winged Stilt briefly visited Camel Estuary, Cornwall.

Drawing crowds to the East Sussex coast for the second time in as many months was a female Pied Wheatear at Seaford Head from 9-15th, with a lingering female Desert Wheatear nearby at Beachy Head. An adult male Red-breasted Flycatcher brightened up a dull autumn day at Great Orme, Caernarfonshire, on 3rd, a Siberian Stonechat in Lincolnshire complemented the Suffolk Amur Stonechat and three Eurasian Penduline Tits arrived. Two European Serins entertained Suffolk birders, with a further seven elsewhere.

Photo analysis of a one-day adult Lesser Grey Shrike at Amble, Northumberland, on 5th confirmed it as a bird previously seen on Terschelling, the Netherlands. Great Grey Shrikes numbered a paltry seven, with a Red-backed Shrike in Co Cork. A late flourish of 'Sibe' *Phylloscopus* warblers included five Dusky Warblers, six Hume's Leaf Warblers and 14 Pallas's Warblers, plus a late-staying Radde's Warbler on Scilly to 2nd.

Further significant sightings in Shetland included Black-bellied Dipper, Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll and Greater Short-toed Lark, plus an Olive-backed Pipit on Fair Isle. A Red-throated Pipit reached Orkney. At the opposite end of the country, a Blyth's Pipit on St Agnes, Scilly, on 16th doubled the archipelago's total for the autumn. Sixteen Richard's Pipits was an above-average return for November. Shore Larks were distributed across nine counties and included notable records in Derbyshire and Co Louth.

Two Wrynecks were reported in Dorset. Elsewhere were three Red-rumped Swallows, five Little Buntings and 20 Hoopoes. Pallid Swifts were confirmed in four counties. Hawfinch put in another strong showing, with the species as widely distributed as during the fabled 2017-18 influx, though the overall number of birds is perhaps a third of that winter's total.

The resuming adult Azores Gull in Cornwall made its way to Newlyn from 9th, where it provided point-blank views. Three Bonaparte's Gulls were in Britain, while eight Ring-billed Gulls included two first-winters in Co Kerry. An adult Laughing Gull flew south past Maidens, Ayrshire, and a Kumlien's Gull was noted in Highland.

A Spotted Crake lingered on Scilly until 1st and Purple Herons were in Somerset and Wiltshire. ■

SAM VILES

A family group of seven Lesser White-fronted Geese arrived in off the sea at Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, on 9th. It transpired that they originated from the Swedish reintroduction scheme.

MICHAEL MCKEE

This apparent juvenile Rough-legged Hawk (the Nearctic *sanctijohannis* subspecies of Rough-legged Buzzard) was a significant find at Sennen, Cornwall, from 3-9th, and followed a noticeable autumn influx to Europe.

MIKE PENNINGTON

This fetching adult drake Bufflehead represented a second record for Shetland when it was discovered on Foula on 17th.

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Western Palearctic: November 2024

WOJCIECH JANECKI

Poland was treated to this marvellous adult Ivory Gull. Found at Władysławowo, Pomerania, on 23 November, it frequented the harbour, offering fantastic views and attracting plenty of admirers in the process. Unfortunately, it was found dead on 30th.

Winter warmers

As autumn migration wound down across the region, a selection of top-class winter and late migrant goodies were unearthed. *Sam Viles* reports.

A late flurry of Nearctic passerines in Fennoscandia provided plenty of excitement for the region's birders. Unexpectedly, Sweden's first Red-eyed Vireo was photographed at Djurgården on 13th, while an Indigo Bunting visited feeders in Hedmark, Norway, on 15th – although its identification as an adult male and the region's propensity for past escapes means that it is unlikely to be accepted. A White-throated Sparrow that toured the Norwegian coast on RMS *Queen Mary 2* between Ålesund and Stavanger mid-month likely arrived onboard before the cruise ship departed North America during October.

Continuing this autumn's Black-faced Bunting influx was a first-winter at Simrishamn, Sweden, on 7-8th. It was the country's second of the autumn and was widely twitched. A female White-winged Scoter was an excellent find off Hemmeslöv, while an Amur Stonechat at Kaxholmen was a national fifth. A male Eastern Yellow Wagtail of the subspecies *plexa* visited Löderups Strandbad.

It has been a fantastic autumn for Oriental Turtle Dove in Norway, with at least six birds recorded so far. Two juveniles with Collared Doves near Vanse from 19th represented the first multiple-bird arrival for Norway and were joined by a juvenile European Turtle Dove for good measure. A bumper count of 502 Pine Grosbeaks was made at Vanse at the start of the month – part of a major influx in the country. A Steppe Grey Shrike was also found nearby.

A Black-necked Grebe at Höfn was an overdue Icelandic first. The White-winged Scoter stuck around in Reykjavík. Meanwhile, Stejneger's Scoter were in Denmark, Sweden and Estonia.

Four Blyth's Pipits (two apiece in Sweden and Spain) increased this autumn's record-breaking European influx to 22 individuals, in addition to one in Britain on 16th and another in Germany in early October. Two further Blyth's remained in France.

Spain reigns

Galicia dominated the action in Spain. A Two-barred Warbler at Vilacha on 16th proved to be a national first, with an apparent pale-morph juvenile Rough-legged Hawk at Xuño on 3rd constituting another excellent discovery. Black-capped Petrel, South Polar Skua and two Barolo Shearwaters were recorded in Galician waters, while Common Yellowthroat, American Coot, American Black Duck

BENEDICT MACDONALD

An impressive count of four Pied Crows was made at Shalatein, Egypt, towards the end of the month. While abundant in sub-Saharan Africa, the species remains a rarity in the WP.

BÉLA TOKODY

This first-winter Menetries's Warbler trapped and ringed at Fehér-tó on the first day of the month was a major find, marking a Hungarian first and one of very few European records of the species.

NICHOLAS GALEA

Malta was treated to a Sooty Falcon on 3rd, with this pristine juvenile discovered on Comino.

and American Herring Gull all lingered into November. A Greater Yellowlegs was in Valencia, with a Sudan Golden Sparrow extending its stay on Gran Canaria and a Brown Booby noted on Lanzarote.

Birders on Flores, Azores, continued to find Nearctic rarities well into November, with a scintillating run of finds including two Common Nighthawks, Northern Waterthrush, American Robin, Dark-eyed Junco, American Pipit, Northern Harrier, Great Blue Heron and Hudsonian Whimbrel. A first-winter male Common Yellowthroat at Furnas, São Miguel, shared the island with the lingering Wood Duck and Great Blue Heron. Killdeer, Little Blue Heron and three American Great Egrets were on Terceira, with an American Coot on Graciosa and the Double-crested Cormorant still on Faial.

A South Polar Skua was logged from a pelagic off Cascais, Portugal, on 1st, while a Steppe Grey Shrike at Vila Nova de Gaia became the nation's first record of this Central Asian taxon. The Yellow-crowned Night Heron and Rough-legged Hawk both continued.

Poland's first Sykes's Warbler was at Moście Błota from 5th, though a sublime adult Ivory Gull caused an even greater stir in the harbour at Władysławowo from 23-30th, with this national second unfortunately found dead on the last date. Additionally, a Black Scoter was off Kuźica. In Germany, a Sandhill Crane in Lower Saxony from 6th was a major highlight, along with the lingering Northern Mockingbird in North Rhine-Westphalia – the latter now fitted with a metal ring on its left leg. Spotted Sandpiper and Eastern Black Redstart added interest.

Dutch delight

A long-awaited first for the Netherlands finally fell with the discovery of a Pechora Pipit at Den Haag on 1st. A second-winter American Herring Gull returned to Gueltas, France. Also lingering in France were Forster's Tern, Eastern Imperial Eagle and Hudsonian Whimbrel.

Starting the month with a bang in Hungary, a first-winter Menetries's Warbler was trapped and ringed at Fehér-tó on 1st. It constituted a surprising national first and becomes one of just a handful recorded in Europe. A juvenile Sooty Falcon graced Comino, Malta, on 3rd and the first Eastern Yellow Wagtail for Cyprus was at Akrotiri.

An adult Lesser Flamingo at Thessaloniki, Greece, appears an all-but-certain candidate for a wild vagrant and a potential national first, although three previous Greek occurrences weren't accepted onto Category A. An Olive-backed Pipit at Antikythera became Greece's second.

Notable discoveries in North Africa included two Tawny Eagles in Algeria – where circumstantial evidence suggests that the species might still maintain a small breeding foothold – and four Pied Crows at Shalatein, Egypt. Morocco recorded its third Velvet Scoter, while the first Pacific Golden Plover for Cape Verde was on Santiago. Late news from April involved Algeria's first Bateleur near Djanet and the first Wilson's Phalarope for Tunisia at Sfax.

A Purple Sunbird at Mutla'a Ranch became the 10th record for Kuwait and the WP. A run of significant finds in Israel included Eyebrowed Thrush, Senegal Thick-knee and two Red-wattled Lapwings, while a Striated Heron reached Lebanon. ■

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Western Cattle Egret
Pagham Harbour LNR, West Sussex | 14:41

Little Gull
Weybourne, Norfolk | 14:38

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Kirkland, Cumbria | 14:35

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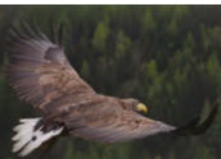

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DAVID CAMPBELL

Pictures or it didn't happen

As birding increases in popularity and more people than ever are armed with cameras and recorders, our columnist wonders if it's now time for all rarity records to require photos or audio files.

Birding is booming in popularity. A combination of the pandemic indirectly opening new eyes to the natural world and the well-timed advances in bird-identification apps has seen our pursuit go mainstream. The countless new enthusiasts have unwittingly breathed fresh life into birding, bringing more diversity and more joy, while dialling down perceptions of birding being stuffy and elitist.

With more people than ever now keeping an eye out, another pleasing result of this proliferation is that more birds are being observed and recorded, with new birders taking readily to recording platforms such as eBird and BirdTrack. This eagerness to contribute to citizen science and our collective knowledge of bird populations (and finding extra rarities!) is to be celebrated, but it doesn't come without complications for record-keepers.

County recorders and bird clubs which accept records from these platforms, as they surely should, are faced with an increasingly overwhelming task to maintain their databases and publish a useful bird report each year due to the sheer volume of data. However, another challenge is becoming hard for anyone to ignore: how to maintain a fair system for assessing claims of unusual taxa as the hobby explodes.

Those lucky enough to find a scarce or rare bird will probably choose to go through the decades-old process of submitting a description for the relevant records committee to vote on, so that the observation is hopefully published. Assessment is straightforward if observers supply photographs or sound recordings, but to ratify other claims, the approach relies on a system of observer honour and committee instinct, alongside analysis of notes and any sketches.

Rarity votes

Although an imperfect system, with some misidentified birds inevitably getting accepted and a small proportion of genuine finds getting the dreaded 'not proven' verdict (sometimes leading individual birders to disengage from the process), voting on the word of observers has been the only option.

It has also been a manageable task until now, with committees getting to know observers and being able to give each written description the attention it deserves for a fair assessment, but with the number of birders and the number of claims going through the roof, it feels like we could be reaching a point where something has to give.

It has never been easier or cheaper to take photographs or sound recordings while in the field. A birder no longer needs to lug bulky equipment around or have specialist skills to take photographs or record calls that seal the deal. Of course, it is impossible to get a shot of every fly-over bird, or capture fleeting sounds, but we seem to be at the point where the majority of birders can easily get firm documentation for the majority of their finds. With the number of 'verbal' claims still rising alongside those with media, observer experience ever tougher to gauge and description-writing skills faltering, is it time to simply say: 'Pictures or it didn't happen'?

Such a move might feel tempting, or even necessary, for those records committees unsure of how to handle the rise in bold yet plausible sightings, but the idea opens a can of worms. Would it be fairer to expect photographs or sound recordings from everyone, given the multitude of barriers that might prevent individuals from being able to use the technology, or to attempt to continue to give fair hearings to a thickening mire of unillustrated descriptions?

Although adding a requirement for media might mean losing out on a proportion of good records, it would in some way level the playing field, meaning every observation is judged on solid evidence that will stand the test of time. ■

DAVID CAMPBELL

Nowadays it's easy enough to obtain record shots of fly-over local scarcities, such as this Spotted Redshank. Is it time to make photos a prerequisite for record acceptance?

> "With the number of birders and the number of claims through the roof, it feels like we could be reaching a point where something has to give"

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MARK AVERY

Six months of Labour

Our columnist debates the performance so far of the UK's recently elected government – and outlines what decisions need to be made moving forward.

Are environmentalists jumping for joy after six months of Labour government? No, we are not, but I'd say the general tenor of the response is 'this lot is better than the last lot, although that isn't saying very much'.

I would agree. It is clear that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has very little clout. It's almost always near the bottom of the pile but it was obvious from the Labour manifesto that there wasn't a lot to expect from the first few months of the new government as far as wildlife is concerned. Whereas the manifesto was choc-a-bloc with ambitious ideas to tackle climate change there was very little on wildlife or, more generally, rural issues. The promise of nine new river walks felt like an unimportant promise made by a party which didn't really know what it was doing. Basically, the environment remains low in the political pecking order.

The government appears to be serious on some things. It is sincere about climate change through deploying renewable energy (good!) but also through carbon capture and storage (good if it worked, but it never has so far). There are many good words about better building standards but there ought to be a massive investment in insulation and solar panels on existing old draughty buildings too. Any large industrial or commercial development should have to have very high energy standards and solar panels need to be part of that.

The government is also determined to encourage the building of new houses and its national Planning Policy Framework document (did you read it and respond to the consultation?) may bring a building site near to you soon. It looks a little as though the house-building industry has captured the government already and is having its way smoothed to bigger profits rather than our way smoothed towards more housing for the poor.

Slow-paced change

The badger cull will end – but not yet, and not soon. In 2010, when Labour lost power, a badger cull was off the table, but the Conservatives made it their main plank of bovine tuberculosis control. Now Labour has not decisively removed it when it could.

I'd say the brightest elements so far are that there are two DEFRA ministers with very good environmental credentials and experience, namely Mary Creagh (a former chair of the Environmental Audit Select Committee) and Baroness Sue Hayman (a former Shadow Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). They are real allies.

In my last column I mentioned the petitions that would be springing up around now on the Westminster parliamentary website, and I was right about that. These are UK petitions and there are fascinating maps that can be viewed to see whence signatures come for every single petition.

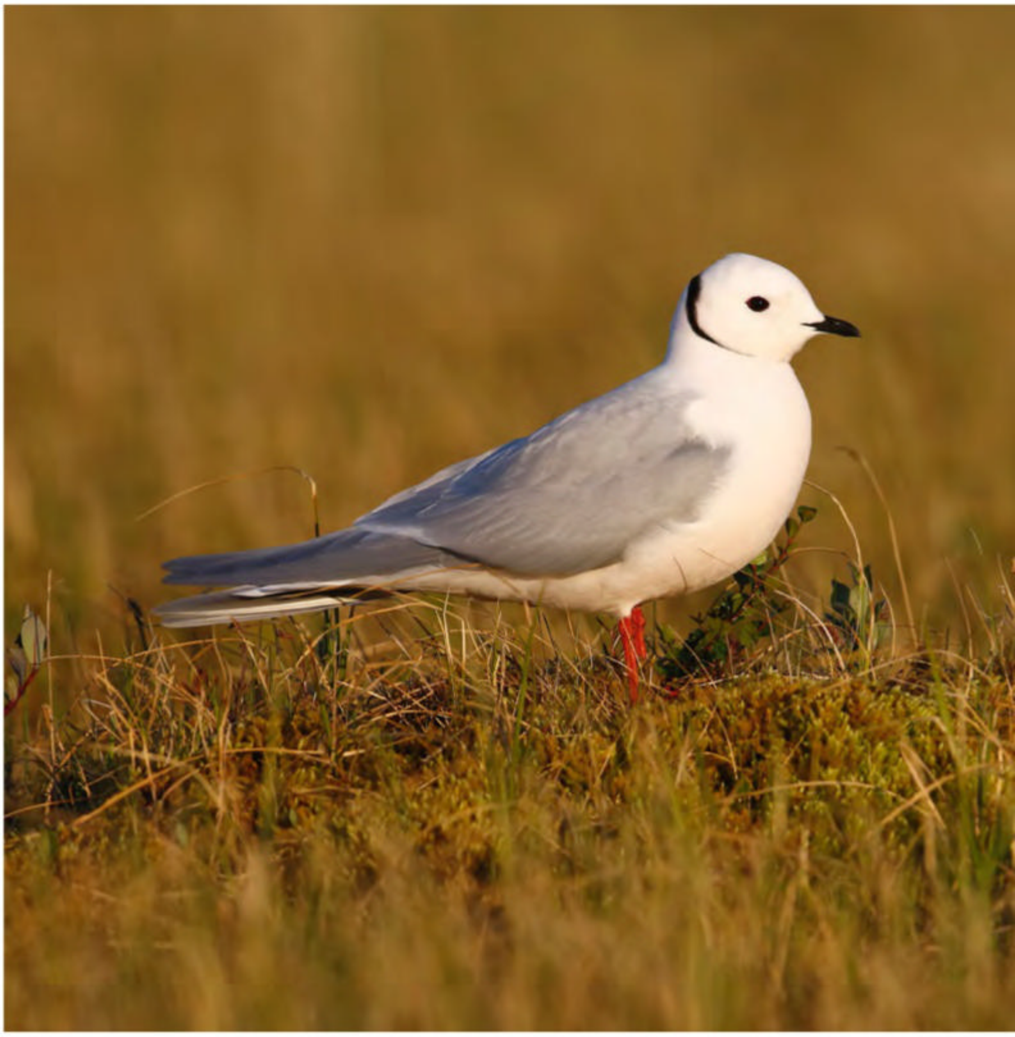
MARIA UNGER

The Labour government elected into power in the summer has produced a mixed performance so far, says our columnist.

> Whereas the manifesto was choc-a-bloc with ambitious ideas to tackle climate change there was very little on wildlife or, more generally, rural issues

At the time of writing, in early December, the most popular environmental petition is that set up by Wild Justice to ban driven grouse shooting, which has already reached in excess of 20,000 signatures. There are also petitions on the subjects of stopping badger culling, banning fossil-fuel advertising and producing a public information campaign on climate change.

The environmental topics nestle among a plethora of others which, for example, call for a general election, ask for the winter fuel payment changes to be reversed and for Brexit to be reversed – none of those will be enacted but they (and all the others) are pin-pricks in parliament's conscience. So, if you want to do some conscience pricking, visit **petition.parliament.uk** and sign away – starting with 'Ban driven grouse shooting' please. All UK residents and UK citizens at home and abroad may sign. ■


CHRIS VAN RIJSWIJK

The mystical Arctic rose

As beautiful as it is mysterious, Ross's Gull has captured the hearts and imaginations of ornithologists and birders since the 19th century. *Ed Stubbs* takes a closer look at this denizen of the High Arctic.

It was a bright but bitterly cold February morning, with the 'Beast from the East' on the horizon, and I was amid a throng of antsy birders at Radipole Lake RSPB car park in Weymouth, Dorset. Many of us had endured a freezing stakeout at nearby Ferrybridge from first light, but the crowds had dispersed by now as it seemed that our target bird had disappeared. However, news had broken that it was back and showing well – and before long I was gawping at one of the true gems of the avian world: an adult Ross's Gull.

The mass scramble to see the bird ensured a period of mayhem. It was so chaotic, in fact, that one person's telescope got stolen in the melee by local chancers. But if there was ever a bird deserving of sending a gathered crowd into delirium it was this – delicate, bug-eyed and dove-headed with orange-red legs and a tiny, jet-black bill, there was an enchanting feel to this High Arctic visitor as it sat contentedly among the local Black-headed Gulls. A dream bird realised.

That was my first encounter with a Ross's Gull. I've only seen one since – a first-summer at Vardø, Varanger, in the far north of Norway. Even there, at some 70°N and on the edge of the Arctic, it was a crowd-puller.

High Arctic life

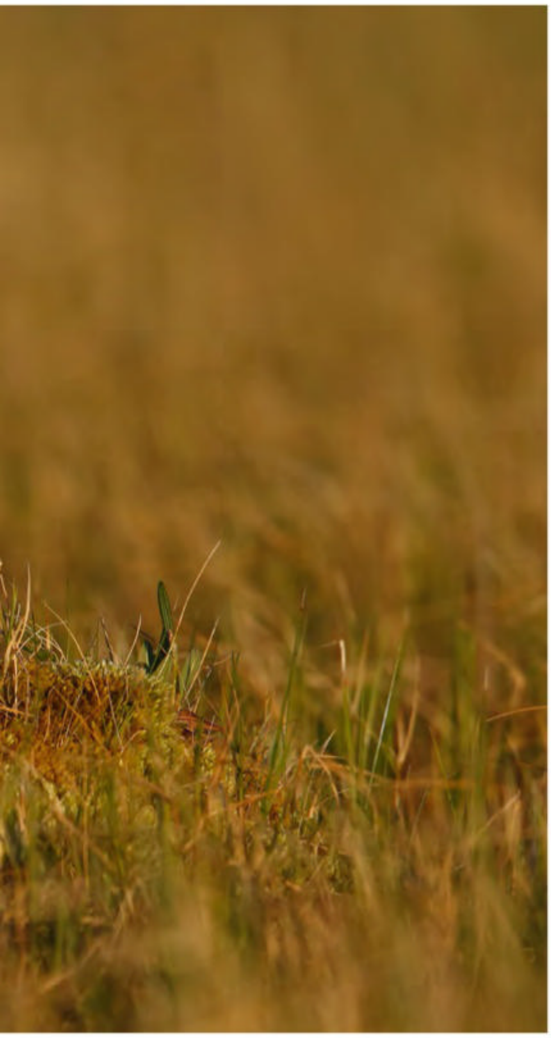
Ross's Gull is the only species in its genus, *Rhodostethia*, which is a name derived from the Ancient Greek 'rhodon' (rose) and 'stethos' (breast), and is a nod to the birds' exquisite summer plumage. It breeds in the High Arctic, chiefly in north-east Siberia and also in northernmost parts of North America (including in Canada and Greenland). There are a handful of breeding records from Svalbard, too.

In the winter, it doesn't knowingly move especially far, heading only a short distance south where, remarkably for such a dainty bird, it braves it out at the edge of the pack ice in the northern Bering Sea and in the Sea of Okhotsk. However, much of its range is still poorly known – especially its core wintering areas.

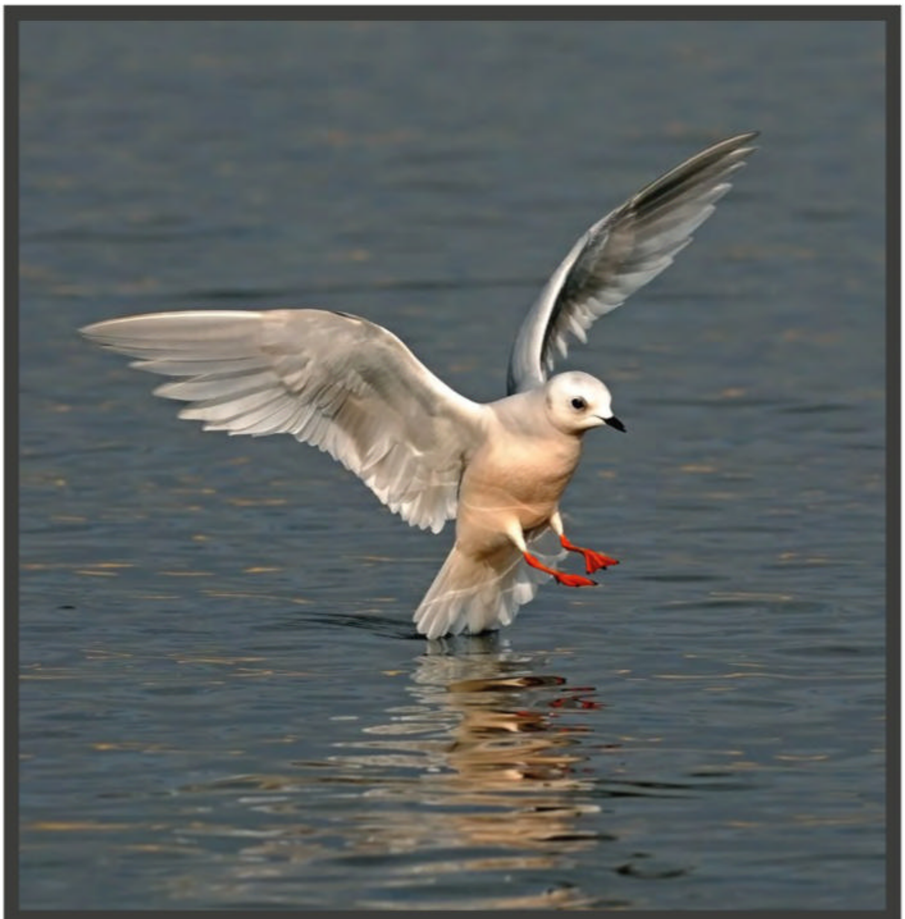
Breeding colonies are small and are found on tundra with sedges, grass tussocks, dwarf willows, bushes, lichens and pools. Typically, birds nest close to water, often in association with Arctic Tern, Spotted Redshank and Ruff, allowing some protection from predators such as Vega Gull, Long-tailed Skua and Arctic Fox. Two or three eggs are laid in a nest on the ground lined with seaweed, grass or moss. Unsurprisingly, breeding success can fluctuate – predators and unpredictable High Arctic weather often take their toll.

Ross's Gull was only discovered in June 1823 and soon acquired a mystical aura among naturalists, such was the combination of its attractiveness, rarity and remote range. Indeed, it became one of the most highly prized trophies among 19th-century collectors. It was named after the famous Arctic explorer, James Clark Ross, who shot the first specimens on the tiny island of Igloolik, between the Melville Peninsula and Baffin Island in Canada.

By the end of the 19th century only a handful of polar explorers had encountered the species. Inevitably, it became an object of captivation and craving for naturalists and collectors alike. Fridtjof Nansen's famous attempt to reach the North Pole between 1893 and 1896 saw the Norwegian explorer undertake an epic journey on the boat *Fram*. Nansen encountered Ross's Gulls flying north near the New Siberian Islands in Russia and said: "This rare and mysterious inhabitant

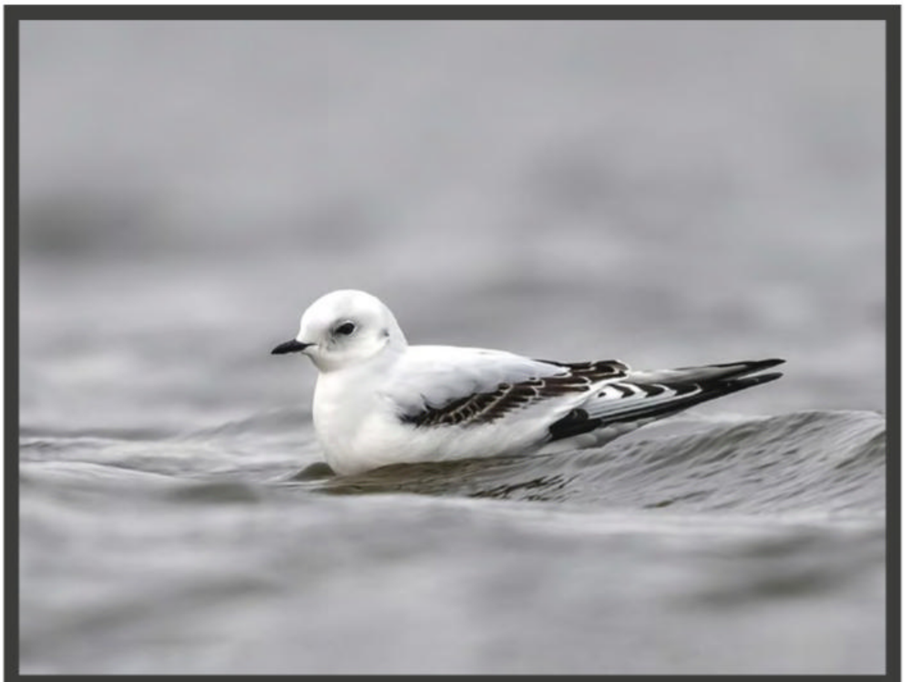


Above: Observing a Ross's Gull in pretty breeding attire and on Arctic breeding grounds is something that few birders have enjoyed.



STEVE YOUNG

The species' genus name, *Rhodostethia*, means 'rose breast'. It is easy to see why in the case of this winter adult, which shows a pinkish flush to the underparts as it alights on water.



VINCENT LEGRAND

First-winter is the more scarcely seen plumage among vagrant birds reaching Western Europe. This individual delighted Dutch birders at Vlissingen from 24 January-21 March 2018.

of the unknown north, which is only occasionally seen, and of which no one knows whence it came or whither it goeth, which belongs exclusively to the world to which the imagination aspires, is that I have always longed to discover."

Nesting grounds discovered

It wasn't until the 20th century that the breeding grounds of Ross's Gull were finally pinned down. In 1905, on behalf of the Russian government, an Arctic expedition to the remote Kolyma region was headed up by Russian ornithologist Sergei Buturlin.

Four months into the expedition, and based in the isolated village of Pokhodsk on the banks of the Kolyma River, Buturlin became the first human to witness Ross's Gull on breeding grounds. Many ornithologists had expected the species to nest in the High Arctic tundra, so the discovery of the first nests in the southern tundra zone, among thickets of willow, birch and alder, came as a surprise.

Since these early finds, further colonies have been found in Arctic Siberia and the breeding population is estimated to be in the region of 45,000-55,000 adults. Furthermore, nesting has been confirmed in Spitsbergen, Greenland and Nunavut, Canada. In 1980, three pairs found at Churchill, Manitoba, marked the first documented breeding on the North American mainland. Known by many as one of the most accessible places in the

CHRIS VAN RIJSWIJK

The breeding grounds of Ross's Gull weren't known until the 20th century when, in 1905 on behalf of the Russian government, an Arctic expedition to the remote Kolyma region headed up by ornithologist Sergei Buturlin resulted in the discovery of nesting birds.

world to see Polar Bear, this discovery unsurprisingly proved popular with visiting birders, even if the birds only nest at Churchill sporadically nowadays.

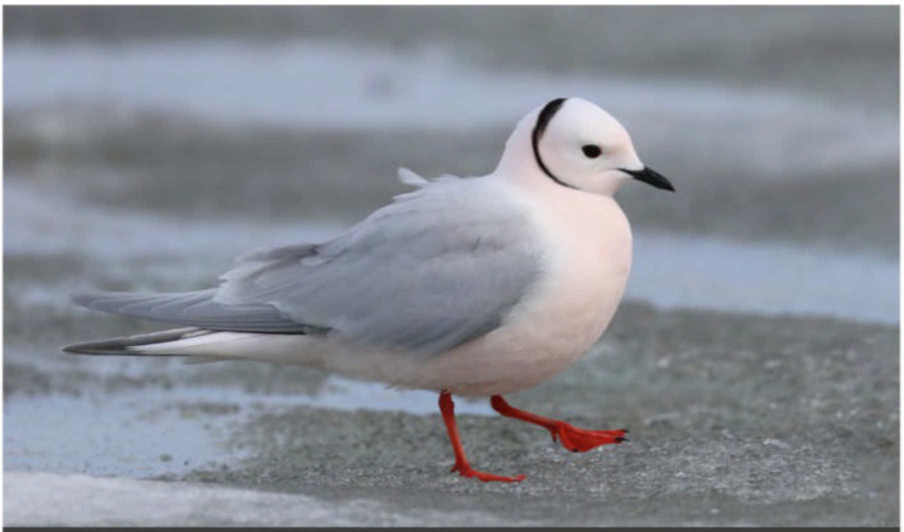
Wintering mystery

While the breeding grounds of Ross's Gulls have gradually been established, there is still an element of mystery as to where the birds spend the winter. An annual passage of adults and juveniles passes Utqiagvik (formerly known as Barrow), Alaska, in September and October each year. Day counts can reach a staggering four-figures, as perhaps a sizeable percentage of the world's population depart from their north-east Siberian breeding areas and pass this northernmost point of land in Alaska … but to where exactly the birds are heading is unclear.

It is thought that many winter in the pack ice in the Bering Strait across to the North Pacific north of Japan (there are irregular records from Hokkaido). It would seem extraordinary that such a bird could survive the dark, frigid winters here, but this mysterious Arctic larid has not yet given up its final secret and there remains an element of uncertainty as a result.

That said, it has recently been understood that some Canadian-breeding birds winter in the north Labrador Sea – perhaps the source of European vagrants. Still, there is plenty to discover about where non-breeding Ross's Gulls reside.

SHILOH SCHULTE



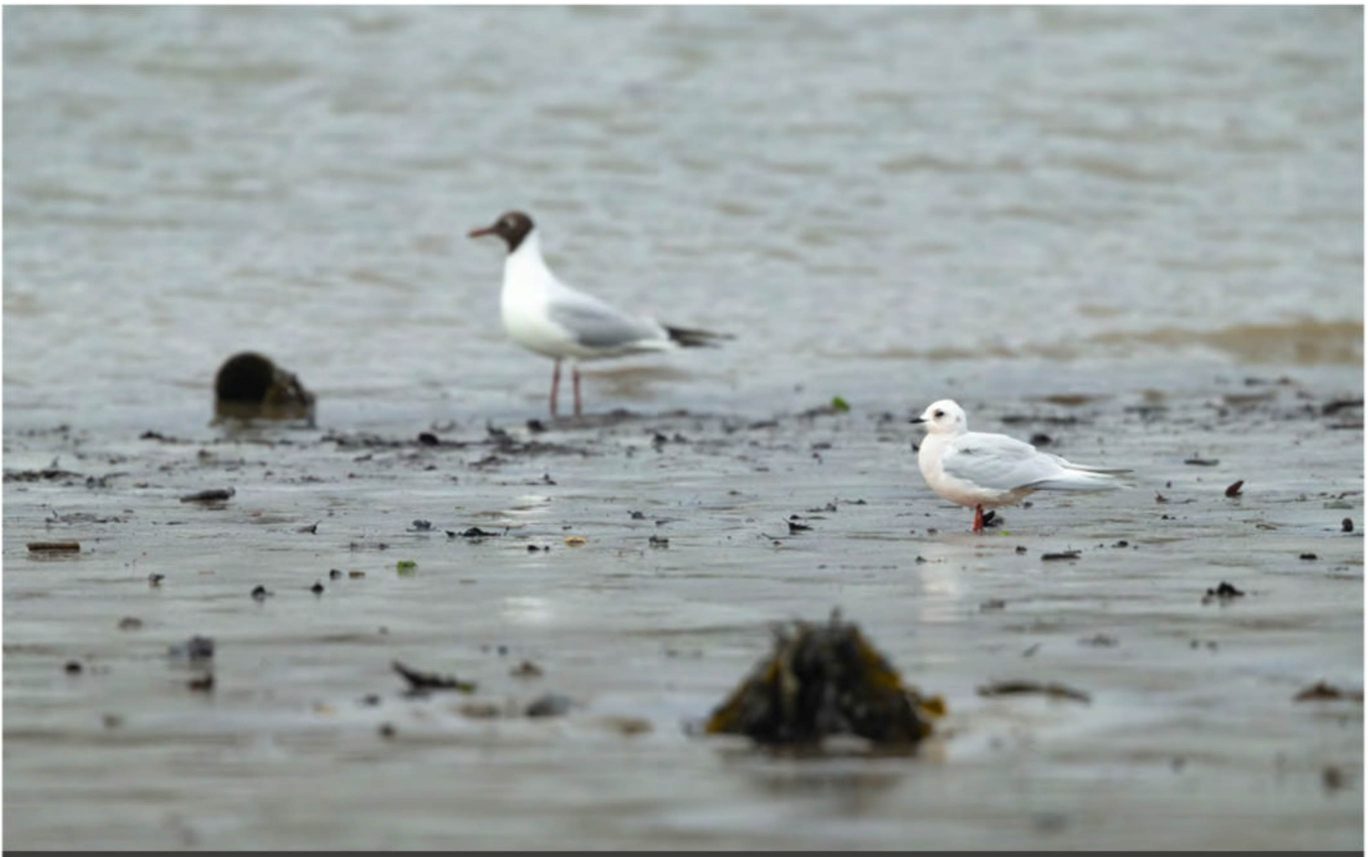
With a black neck ring, dark bill, pink wash to the breast and blood-red legs, adult Ross's Gull in breeding plumage is both unmistakable and beautiful.

Britain and Europe

Despite keeping such secrets, Ross's Gull is a regular wandering vagrant to Europe. In fact, it has occurred as far south as Macedonia, Sardinia and Spain and appears in Western Europe almost annually, always proving popular wherever and whenever one appears. The great majority of records are coastal, reflecting the species' maritime tendencies.

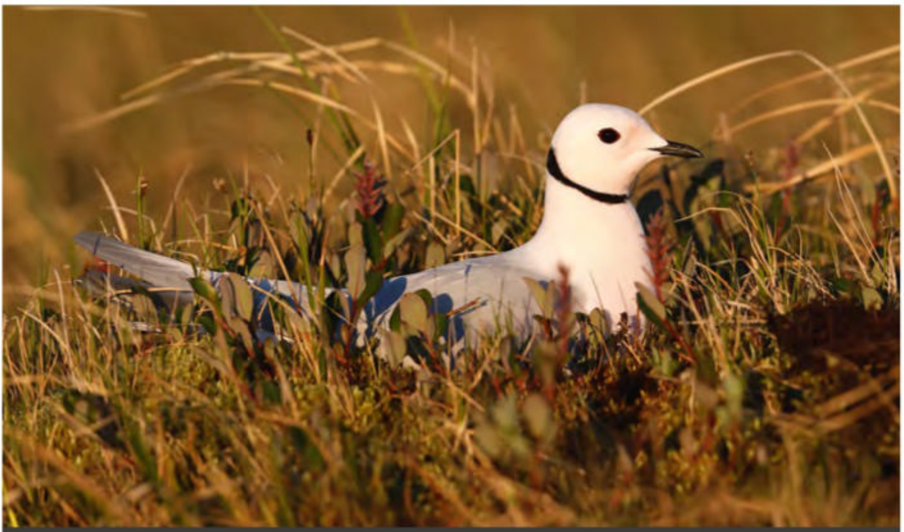
Britain's first was caught by a fishing crew on a boat near Whalsay, Shetland, on 28 April 1936. Some 112 records have occurred since then, with a further 25 in Ireland. Unsurprisingly, the majority of British records are from Scotland. Shetland has had the most of all counties, followed by Yorkshire, which has 13 records. Aberdeenshire has good form, too, with 11 occurrences

OLIVER SMART



The small size of the species is demonstrated well in this photo, with a breeding-plumaged Black-headed Gull alongside for comparison. Even at this range, the richness in the red colour of the legs stands out, as does with the dove-like head shape, dainty bill and dark ear spot.

CHRIS VAN RIJSWIJK



Ross's Gull nests in the southern tundra zone in the Arctic, among thickets of willow, birch and alder, often close to breeding waders to help with protection against potential predators.

to date. Kinnaird Head boasts four of these, including an adult in 2023 that was present on and off from 4 March until 19 April. The only other 2023 record was an extraordinary inland bird at Dorchester Water Meadows, Dorset, for a single afternoon on 13 February.

Unsurprisingly, winter has produced the bulk of the records and the peak month of occurrence is January, with more than 40 sightings. That said, Ross's Gull has turned up in Britain at all times of the year – a rather tatty immature even spent the summer in south Devon in 2014.

Typically, though, British records involve relatively fleeting birds – in keeping with a somewhat nomadic, mysterious maritime bird. As a result, it remains highly desirable and any twitchable individual will spark a frenzy, much like that for the bird I saw in Dorset in 2018.

Interestingly, adults make up more than 75% of all occurrences in Britain. A two-year gull, adults have pale grey upperparts, are pale underneath and have small, dark bills. A large, dark eye and dark ear spot stand out on a pale, rounded head. A rosy-pink wash can be made out on the underparts; this is far more prominent in the summer and is the reason behind the 'rose breast' genus name. A narrow black neck ring is striking in summer plumage and occasionally evident in the winter.

First-winters have contrasting black, grey and white plumage, not unlike Kittiwake and Little Gull of the same age. However, a wonderful diamond-shaped tail helps distinguish birds of this age. The unusual tail shape is also evident on adults and makes for an eye-catching bird in flight, the style of which is akin to a tern.

Enigmatic and attractive, it doesn't seem a stretch to suggest that Ross's Gull might be one of the most charismatic birds on Earth. It took time for its breeding grounds to be discovered – and we're still waiting to fully understand where most birds spend the winter months. Does it really tough it out among the Arctic pack ice? When will the next bird grace British shores – and will it hand around long enough for the masses to enjoy? There is no doubt that Ross's Gull is a bird that leaves you asking questions and wanting more. ■

MARC GUYT (AGAMI.NL)

The final frontiers

Despite being intensely birded for the most part, the Western Palearctic likely still has a few avian surprises yet to spring, as *Brian McCloskey* discusses.

Consisting of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, the Western Palearctic (WP) has one of the best-documented avifaunas of any world region. The great majority of species residing in the WP are well known, while recent years have seen some of its rarest residents rediscovered – the highest-profile examples including Common Buttonquail in Morocco, Brown Fish Owl in Türkiye and Caspian Tit in Azerbaijan (see *Birdwatch* 349: 21-24). Despite this, there are still pockets of the WP which are scantily visited and may yet yield surprises, be it exciting vagrants, rediscoveries or perhaps even previously unknown relict populations.

Unsurprisingly, it is the more difficult-to-access countries that are likely to reveal the biggest revelations. Relatively little is known of the birdlife in countries such as Mauritania, Algeria, Libya, Chad, Mali, Niger, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, all of which have been out of bounds to foreign nationals at varying points (some remain that way) and thus are largely unexplored by birders.

In recent times, observers have started to visit Mauritania and Algeria more regularly and are uncovering surprises on an annual basis. In contrast, Russia, which was well visited by regional birders up until the country's invasion of Ukraine, could yet still hold a shock or two in the Urals especially, but is off limits for now. As time progresses and geopolitical situations change, it may well be that many of these countries become more easily accessible, in turn producing new or rediscovered WP birds that many go on to enjoy.

Middle Eastern gems

Of the WP's least-birded nations, Iraq surely sits among those with the greatest untapped potential. It is known to harbour tricky regional species, some of which have now spread into the neighbouring well-birded destinations of Türkiye and Kuwait. For example, it is possible to see Iraq Babbler along the Euphrates River as far as Birecik in Türkiye, while Red-wattled Lapwing is now easily gettable in the irrigated areas of Kuwait and also in certain parts of southern Türkiye. Indian Roller, which is common throughout Iraq, winters in small numbers in Kuwait and is usually gettable there at that season, although it can be difficult.

However, there is one species that would have keen WP birders heading to Iraq in a flash: African Darter. Breeding in the south-east of the country at Hawizeh Marshes, this waterbird has

Facing page: There are surely revelations left to unfold involving seabirds such as Bermuda Petrel within WP waters.

BRIAN MCCLOSKEY

Several high-profile regional rediscoveries have taken place over the past couple of decades, such as breeding Common Buttonquail in coastal Morocco.

CHARLES J SHARP

African Darter is resident in the marshes of south-east Iraq. However, this country is largely off limits to foreign nationals, meaning that WP birders are yet to get the opportunity to see it.

occurred in Kuwait only once, when two birds were found at Al-Jahra Reserve in September 2009. It is tantalising to imagine what the wetlands of Iraq might be like to bird with African Darters on show and a constant background chorus of Basra Reed Warblers.

A country that had been off limits to most visitors until recently is Saudi Arabia, which only opened its doors to tourists for the first time in 2019. Northernmost Saudi, north of 28°N, lies within the WP boundary as defined by Cramp and Simmons in *Birds of the Western Palearctic*. It was unknown as to whether any Saudi Arabian endemics may occur this far north until Pierre-André Crochet and Philippe Geniez undertook a pioneering trip to the area in summer 2024, finding the first Arabian Sunbirds for the WP and documenting new sites for Desert Owl and Arabian Lark, both of which are challenging species to catch up with in the region.

Given how under-birded this area is, it is tempting to think that Arabian Partridge may well occur inside the WP, especially given that this species has been expanding north in recent years and its current known range extends to within 100 km of the boundary. Arabian Serin is another species that has been found just south of the WP border in Saudi Arabia and seems a likely addition in the future.

Mysteries of the Maghreb

The vast, arid expanse of North Africa is incredibly under-birded, despite some areas now receiving more attention than they did in the past. Due to civil war and an ongoing fragile security situation, Libya has received almost no outside ornithological attention in recent years.

In the north-east of the country, the distinctive *barbata* subspecies of Barbary Partridge occurs and has recently been tipped for full species status. 'Cyrenaica Partridge', as it is known, differs from the nominate subspecies by being slightly larger, with bolder flank stripes and a paler orange crown and necklace. Previously known from Egypt, it has not been recorded there since 1964 and is now considered to be one of the region's most threatened avian taxa, with a tiny range that is susceptible to human pressures such as hunting. Should it be split, Cyrenaica Partridge will become one of the most difficult-to-see WP species, much as Algerian Nuthatch was for several decades before Algeria opened up, in turn allowing many more birders to visit there in recent years.

Despite receiving greater ornithological attention nowadays, it still feels like there is a lot to learn about the birdlife of Algeria – especially in the south. Given the restrictions within the country, particularly in the Tamanrasset area, where foreign birders generally require a police escort to leave the city, discovering new sites and new species is difficult.

It seems that Tawny Eagle is likely still breeding in north-west Algeria. Disappearing from Morocco in the early 1990s, this hasn't been a realistically gettable species for WP listers since then. However, it seems a safe bet to assume that in the coming years, reliable Tawny Eagle sites will become known among birders.

In the south, excellent rarities such as White-throated Bee-eater and Jacobin Cuckoo have been found in recent times. Given that 2024 has been one of the wettest years in the Sahara in half a century, it will be interesting to see if any extreme rarities are discovered in the area in the coming months. Perhaps Northern Grey-headed Sparrow will be seen within the WP boundary after it was recently added to the Algerian list, while regional listers might also be ticking Chestnut-bellied Starling soon, this species having been recorded south of Tamanrasset in 2023.

SALEM ASSAKER

Nowadays only found in north-east Libya, 'Cyrenaica Partridge' is touted as a likely split from Barbary Partridge. This distinctive form is probably also one of the region's most endangered birds.

PETE MORRIS (AGAMI.NL)

Pygmy Sunbird is widespread south of the Sahara, but in the WP is only found in Tibesti, Chad. Logistical difficulties mean that almost no regional birder has seen the species.

Out of Africa

Mauritania has also been better visited over the past decade. However, most groups spend just about enough time on the coast to ensure that they connect with targets such as Reed Cormorant, Grey-headed Gull and West African Crested Tern before heading inland to the Choum and Ouadane areas. A number of interesting species have been discovered there in recent times, including Blue-naped Mousebird, African Grey Woodpecker and Golden Nightjar, while the likes of Chestnut-bellied Starling have been found to be breeding tantalisingly close to the WP boundary.

In March 2024, a team of Polish birders dedicated some time to the gardens around Nouadhibou and also Cap Tafarit near Banc d' Arguin. They were richly rewarded for their efforts, finding the first regional records of Grasshopper Buzzard and Red-billed Quelea, as well as an Abyssinian Roller and potentially the first Category A records of Red-billed Firefinch for the region. Given its coastal location and its positioning on a promontory, Nouadhibou is surely one of the go-to places to find exciting Afrotropical vagrants, potentially including new WP species, and will presumably reveal many more surprises in the years ahead.

The northernmost parts of Mali, Niger and Chad all lie within the WP boundary. Very little is known about the birdlife in these areas. Northern Chad is off limits to birders due to civil unrest in the country and may well hold a surprise or two. One species that is already known to occur here which is not found anywhere else in the region is Pygmy Sunbird. In 1953, a small population was found near Tibesti NP. The birds are almost certainly still in this area, with a report from 2011 confirming their continued presence. The first WP record of Jacobin Cuckoo also occurred in Tibesti, in September 1955, while it is tempting to think that an Arabian Bustard or two may still wander on WP soil, despite persecution diminishing its populations.

RALPH MARTIN (AGAMI.NL)

Given there is a record from the Nile Valley near Luxor in January 2011, it could well be that Bruce's Green Pigeon maintains a small and as yet undiscovered breeding population in Egypt.

Untapped goldmine

Perhaps the greatest potential of all North African countries lies in Egypt. Though it is an established destination for regional birders, the southern reaches of the nation remain relatively unexplored and, as with other peripheral areas of the WP, long periods can pass with barely any targeted coverage at all and regional rarities can go years without being reported.

A good example of this is African Skimmer. Well documented from Lake Nasser at Abu Simbel over the years, the species was seen annually up until 2014, but since then there hasn't been a single report. Have skimmers stopped visiting the area or is it solely down to a lack of coverage? It is hard to know, but one thing is for sure – Lake Nasser and the Nile Valley are massively underwatched. Given that the Nile offers a direct connection to sub-Saharan African, the scope for further vagrant finds in southern Egypt surely makes it unique within the WP. Many incredible rarities have turned up in the past, including Mourning Collared Dove, African Openbill and most intriguingly, Bruce's Green Pigeon, which was photographed in January 2011 near Luxor. Could a small population of this exotic pigeon persist somewhere along the Nile Valley?

Over the past 15 years, Egypt has produced some extraordinary ornithological stories. Perhaps the most impressive was the 2012 discovery of breeding Yellow Bittern some 2,000 km west of its previously known range,

JAMES EATON (AGAMI.NL)

With a sighting of 14 Relict Gulls in north-west Kazakhstan in May 2000, is it that far-fetched to think that this Central Asian breeder could be a regular visitor to the WP?

JOSH JONES

Yellow-eyed Pigeon is another Central Asian species already on the regional list. It migrates to spend the winter in Pakistan and north-west India but is declining due to hunting pressures.

while Saunders's Tern was found to be nesting in the Red Sea and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse was rediscovered in the Sandafa area after an absence of at least three decades. One species that will surely be pinned down sooner rather than later is Verreaux's Eagle. Birds are still occasionally reported from the mountains inland of the Red Sea and the species is almost certainly breeding regularly in Egypt.

Out in the east

North-west Kazakhstan holds huge potential and its breeding White-winged and Black Larks, Caspian Plover, Red-headed Bunting and Sykes's Warbler could well be the tip of the iceberg in this area. There is a tantalising record of 14 Relict Gulls which were seen on both sides of the Russia-Kazakhstan border along the Malyy Uzen River in May 2000. Given that most birders have visited this area in June, one wonders whether this truly was a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence or if Relict Gull in fact occasionally shows up in this area in spring.

It seems likely that Pallas's Sandgrouse is still a regular visitor to the WP and, given how vast the steppe of interior north-west Kazakhstan is, it would take a brave person to bet against the species still breeding here occasionally. Another intriguing find in recent years was that of apparent Black-headed Penduline Tits on the west side of the Ural River.

Neighbouring Russia is among the WP's ultimate birding destinations, albeit one that for now is off limits. The Ural Mountains offer a unique opportunity to experience 'Sibes' such as White's Thrush, Black-throated Accentor and Siberian Long-tailed Rosefinch on breeding grounds and it seems possible that the likes of Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler may also breed this far west. Is it really that fanciful to think that Yellow-eyed Pigeon might stray westwards to the Ural Valley in the Orenburg region of Russia?

Further possibilities

In recent years, an increasing number of Black-capped Petrel reports from Cape Verde culminated in Peter Stronach observing multiple birds exhibiting behaviour suggestive of breeding off Santo Antão – it seems that the book has been completely rewritten when it comes to seabirds in the region.

Indeed, this family must offer many surprises that pelagic trips to the peripheries of the WP may yet uncover. For example, Trindade Petrel is surely much more regular than current records let on, with several sightings in the Azores this autumn, while it could be that these waters potentially also hold wintering Bermuda Petrels – perhaps time will tell.

Back on land, one may think that the chances of encountering new breeding species away from the region's least-explored corners might be a challenge. However, as the rediscovery of Brown Fish Owl in the relatively well-birded nation of Türkiye goes to show, nothing can be ruled out. Also in that country, the appearance of breeding Plain Leaf Warblers in consecutive years near Van Gölü in 2004-05 hints that this species may maintain a foothold in the area, even if there have been no records since.

Despite being well birded in many corners, the WP produces surprises on an annual basis and will surely continue to do so in the years ahead. While some of these may involve the rediscovery of long-lost populations, sometimes hiding in plain sight, others will concern finds that come straight out of left field, be they breeding birds or incredible vagrants. What's clear is that the region has plenty left to give – and that should be more than enough to inspire any intrepid birder out there. ■

DR KEZ ARMSTRONG

Northern Ireland’s seabird sanctuary

With its impressive seabird colonies and a rich ornithological history, Copeland in Co Down is Northern Ireland’s sole bird observatory. Obs president *Dr Kez Armstrong* discusses its history and birdlife.

Situated off the Co Down coast, near the entrance to Belfast Lough, the Copeland Islands – Big Copeland, Old Lighthouse and Mew – might be small in size, but they’re big when it comes to their role in conservation. These islands constitute an impressive area for wildlife due to their variety of habitats that support lots of different species. Recognised for their ecological importance, the Copeland Islands are designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA), primarily because of their breeding colonies of Manx Shearwater and Arctic Tern. They are also an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) thanks to their vital role for seabirds, waders, coastal plantlife and unique geological formations.

Among the three islands, Old Lighthouse Island holds a particularly special place in the hearts of birders and ornithologists in Northern Ireland. It is home to Copeland Bird Observatory, Northern Ireland’s only bird observatory and one of only two on the island of Ireland (the other being Cape Clear, Co Cork; see *Birdwatch* 382: 24-28). The island was discovered to be a significant breeding site for Manx Shearwater in 1939 when early pioneers of the island’s ornithology, Douglas Deane and Denis Rankin, dug up a shearwater burrow to confirm that the birds were nesting on the island. The discovery sparked an explosion of interest in Copeland and soon naturalists were flocking to the area, including one of the founding members of the observatory, Arnold Benington.

Arnold was instrumental in generating interest in the Copeland Islands as an area for ornithology, leading regular trips to record and study the wildlife. In 1947, he brought a BBC recording crew to Old Lighthouse Island to capture the distinctive calls of the shearwaters in their burrows. The recording was broadcast that October in a special programme called *Shearwater Island* on the Northern Ireland Home Service, bringing the islands’ ornithological significance into the spotlight.

Arnold’s commitment to advancing the study of birdlife in the islands didn’t stop there. After the first 19 Manx Shearwaters were ringed in 1952, he led discussions about establishing a dedicated bird observatory. Thanks to the generosity of the owner, Captain Ker of Portavo, who agreed to lease Old Lighthouse Island to the observatory for just one shilling a year, the dream became a reality. More than 70 years ago, on 27 February 1954, the great day arrived when Arnold led the first official visit to Copeland Bird Observatory, marking the start of a new chapter in the islands’ rich ornithological history.

In the modern day

Today, the island is leased to the observatory by the National Trust. The spirit of the Copeland Bird Observatory’s founding members is alive and well, with dedicated volunteers, visitors and members continuing many of the same traditions that have defined the observatory for decades. A detailed diary is kept for every evening that the island is occupied, documenting everything from bird catches and maintenance tasks, to the latest sightings and personal stories from those staying on the island.

While bird ringing remains at the heart of the observatory’s work, with a particular focus on tracking the Manx Shearwater population and monitoring activity during peak migration, the team has expanded its efforts in recent years. The scope now includes moth trapping, botanical surveys, gull colour ringing,

Above: Situated off the Co Down coast in the Irish Sea, the Copeland Islands are home to Northern Ireland's sole bird observatory.

MARTIN REITH

Copeland is perhaps best known for its breeding population of Manx Shearwater, which numbers nearly 5,000 birds. The shearwaters have been well studied during the last few decades.

DR KEZ ARMSTRONG

Ringing is a major part of the work undertaken at Copeland Bird Observatory. The islands have a large mixed colony of breeding gulls, some chicks of which are being fitted with rings here.

eider ringing on Mew Island and habitat restoration projects along with research links to Queen's University Belfast and the University of Oxford. Additionally, a recent innovation has seen the introduction of audio recording equipment, allowing the observatory to track bird movements during the periods when the island is not manned over the winter periods.

When Manx Shearwaters first arrived on Copeland, there were few places for them to nest. Unlike other colonies, where it's thought that shearwaters dig their own burrows, Copeland's birds rely entirely on burrows previously dug by rabbits, which were introduced to the islands in the late 19th century. The origins of Copeland's shearwater colony have been the subject of study, with protein electrophoresis tests conducted by David Whitehall and David Parkin in 1977 revealing that the birds are distinct from those of nearby colonies on Skokholm and Skomer, Pembrokeshire, possibly due to the island's isolation and the shearwaters' adaptation to local conditions.

The Irish Sea and Atlantic Ocean provide prime feeding grounds for the shearwaters, with local fishermen regularly reporting feeding flocks of up to 1,000 birds. Despite this, the shearwater population is still limited by available nesting sites. The islands' ecosystem relies on the maintenance of both rabbit burrows and the right vegetation to sustain the growing shearwater population. Burrow availability is key, as the latest surveys show that around 55% of the available burrows on Copeland are occupied by shearwaters. To encourage the rabbit population and advance the growth of the shearwater colony, a team of dedicated volunteers conducts regular vegetation maintenance, with mowing programmes aimed at maintaining the open, short grassland essential for both rabbits and shearwaters.

Breeding shearwaters

The challenges don't stop there. Flooding of burrows during wet years, predation by gulls and otters and the threat of diseases such as viral haemorrhagic disease and myxomatosis further complicate the survival of both rabbits and shearwaters on Copeland. However, our continued management efforts are aimed at keeping the islands' ecosystems in harmony. The mantra of Copeland Bird Observatory is simple: 'no rabbits, no shearwaters.'

Manx Shearwaters have claimed the title of the most ringed bird on Copeland Island, which isn't surprising given we boast a population of some 4,800 individuals. Thanks to our decades-long study, we have had recoveries of 330 of these seabirds at 212 different locations. And that's not all – our research has also uncovered movements between colonies around the UK, with 22 birds showing up on Bardsey and another 22 on Skokholm. Some Copeland shearwaters have ventured as far as the Amazon, while others have popped up in unexpected places such as Detroit, US, and Switzerland.

The data we've collected over 70 years details the original sub-colonies where they were first ringed, sub-colonies at which they were recaptured and their longevity. In fact, until 2004, a Manx Shearwater breeding on Copeland was the oldest known living wild bird in the Northern Hemisphere. It was ringed as an adult in 1953 (when it was at least five years old), making it at least 55 years old when it was re-trapped in 2003.

Another standout example from our records is bird 'EB48782', an island legend showing how strong the shearwater breeding site fidelity is after being re-trapped 36 times during 13 of 32 years between 1977 and 2009 at the same sub-colony. These records not only map the birds' epic migrations from Northern Ireland to South America, but also provide insights into their faithfulness to their breeding sites on the island.

ROBIN CHITTENDEN

Common Eider breeds around the islands' shores. Studies by the observatory have examined how faithful females are to various nest sites each breeding season.

COPELAND BIRD OBSERVATORY

Following the discovery of breeding Manx Shearwaters in 1939, Copeland attracted interest from conservationists and ornithologists. This photo is of a recce trip to the islands in 1941.

Bird haven

Although Manx Shearwater is the star attraction of the observatory, it's not the only species we focus our ringing efforts on. In 2024, the first-ever Little Egret ringed at the observatory, and indeed in the whole of Northern Ireland, was caught by Chris Acheson (who recently retired from the Copeland Bird Observatory committee after 50 years as our ringing secretary) and ringed by Richard Donaghey.

Staff return to live at Copeland Bird Observatory each March, ushering in the first signs of spring with the arrival of early migrants and the first trips for habitat management. This is the time to spot Hen Harriers gliding over the landscape, Red Kites soaring on thermals and Ravens prospecting for nesting sites. Early falls of spring migrants bring a flutter of activity, with highlights including Goldcrests, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, European Stonechats and, in 2023, a Eurasian Woodcock – a rare catch, being only the fourth to be ringed on the island.

As the season progresses, warblers arrive. Common Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps and the occasional Reed and Sedge Warblers join the island chorus. By May, Stock Doves begin their courtship displays, while gulls, Black Guillemots and Puffins gather in growing numbers ahead of the breeding season.

Summer belongs to the seabirds. The distinctive calls of Manx Shearwaters dominate the evenings as the long-term monitoring of the colony takes centre stage. Meanwhile, several ringers on our team turn their attention to Black Guillemots, Lesser Black-backed and European Herring Gulls and Common Eider. The observatory's gull colour-ringing project, now in its third year, continues to provide valuable insights into the movement and dispersal of our gulls, with our Lesser Black-backed Gulls venturing to Morocco, Spain and Portugal, and herring gulls moving across Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland. Arctic Terns are continuing to attempt to expand their presence onto Old Lighthouse Island and many ringers enjoy setting European Storm Petrel nets there at night.

Autumn migration

Come autumn, the pace shifts again as shearwater chicks start to emerge and migration kicks into gear. September offers peak diversity – as well as a fantastic chance for T-licence ringers to expand their experience with species

Copeland
BIRD OBSERVATORY
COUNTY DOWN

ROBIN CHITTENDEN

The attractive Black Guillemot breeds around the islands during the summer months and is a fitting species of choice for the Copeland Bird Observatory logo.

DR KEZ ARMSTRONG

In 2023 this Little Egret became the first of its species to be trapped and ringed at Copeland. It also signified a first ringing record for Northern Ireland.

such as Swallow, Meadow Pipit and even the occasional Water Rail, along with shearwater ringing at night.

By October's end, as the observatory prepares to wind down, we focus on thrushes, with Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and Redwings making their way to the island in steady numbers. Recent Octobers have also seen an uptick in notable sightings and the ringing of Lesser Whitethroat, Yellow-browed Warbler and Black Redstart. In 2023 we had another Northern Irish ringing first – European Nightjar.

Highlights from our 70-year history are many, as we've kept an excellent record of all observatory activities since that very first weekend. Exceptional birds have included Scarlet Tanager, Bluethroat, Black-browed Albatross, White's Thrush, Melodious, Icterine and Barred Warblers and Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes. We've also had several firsts for Northern Ireland, including Little Auk and Radde's Warbler. Seawatching sessions provide opportunities to view Cory's and Sooty Shearwaters and Arctic, Pomarine, Long-tailed and Great Skuas.

Currently, we hold the only British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) ringing record of a Red Fox Sparrow, which was ringed on the island on 3 June 1961 and re-trapped the next day – the first recorded occurrence of this American species in the entire Western Palearctic.

We are also treated to sightings of marine mammals such as Harbour Porpoise and Northern Bottlenose Dolphin; occasionally Orca and other cetacean species can be seen.

Volunteer spirit

As an observatory, we rely on volunteers and membership to help us to continue to monitor and record the birds breeding on and migrating through Copeland, as well as to maintain the habitats each year. Visitors are eagerly encouraged to visit for both research and ringing opportunities. Stays are typically organised around weekends from March to October. Accommodation is provided in the observatory, which is equipped with an off-grid electricity system, five dormitories and a communal kitchen and living area – complete with a roaring fire to welcome you back after a night of shearwater ringing. The highlight for many of our visitors is the 'loo with a view' – binoculars are handy as you make use of this facility!

Although membership is not essential to visit us for a weekend trip, joining as a member is a fantastic way to support our vital work and all members can take advantage of half-price weekend visits to the island. They can also join our Islander Programme, where all visits after your fourth within the year are free. Furthermore, members receive regular updates on our projects and research and the Copeland Bird Observatory annual report. As a completely volunteer-led organisation, all funding generated from membership goes towards ringing equipment and maintaining the island's habitats, accommodation and facilities, which are prone to wear and tear given their age and exposed position in the Irish Sea.

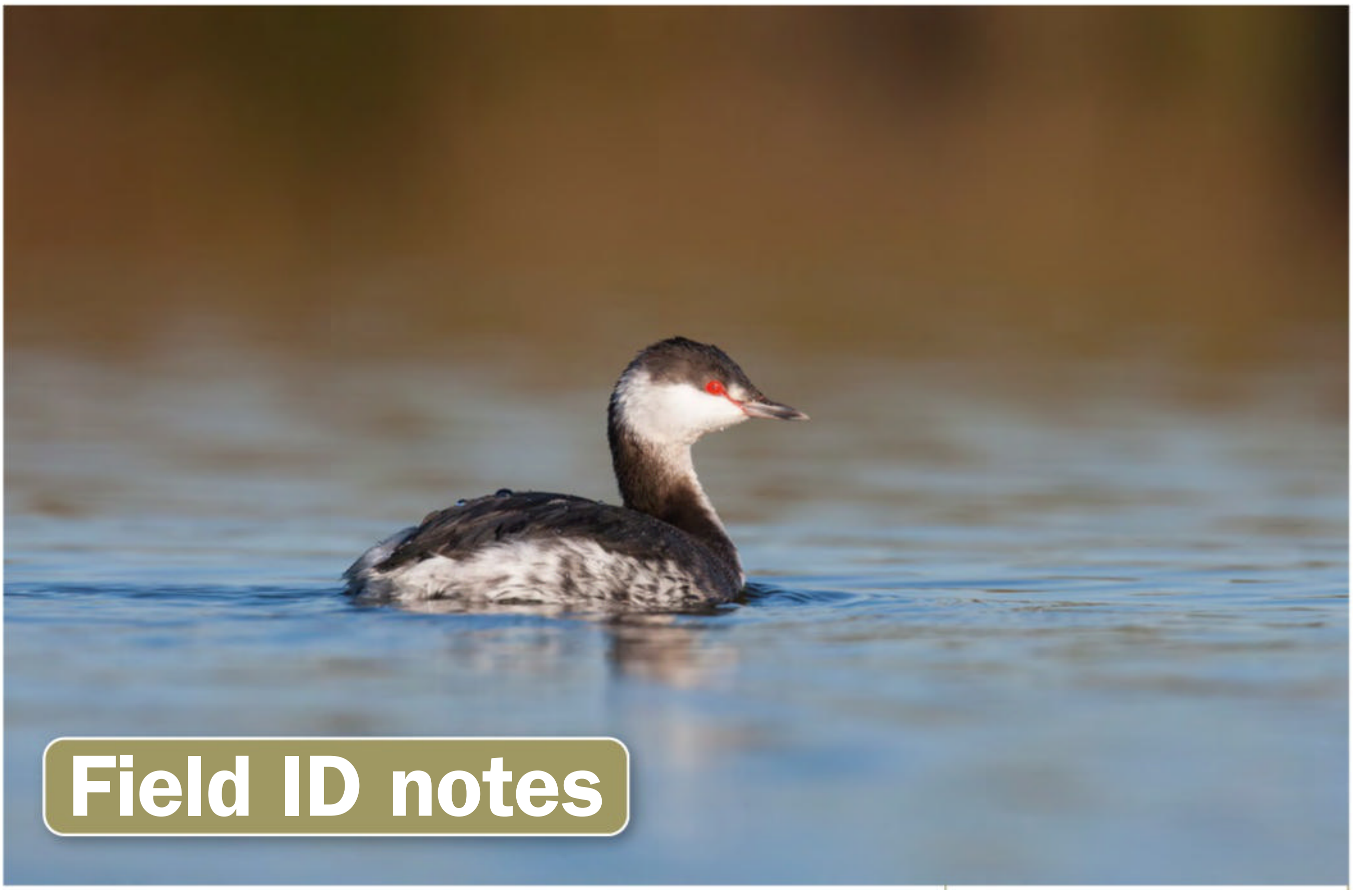
We provide excellent training for all ringers to gain experience in passerine and seabird ringing, including the opportunity to add a rarity to your totals, and we have been successful in offering seabird ringing training through the BTO's Seabird Ringing Grant, providing fully funded visits to train ringers to gain seabird handling and ringing experience.

With all this on offer and so much more, I can personally guarantee that your first visit to Copeland Bird Observatory won't be your last. So, what are you waiting for? ■

Further information

To find out more about the work of Copeland Bird Observatory, including membership, volunteering and visiting, please visit **www.thecbo.org.uk**.

OLIVER SMART



Above: The pied plumage, neatly defined cap and red eye identifies this bird as a Slavonian Grebe.

Field ID notes

Winter grebes

Five grebe species are regular in Britain during the winter, with a sixth being a very rare visitor from North America. ***Miles Cluff*** offers tips on how to separate these sometimes-tricky waterbirds.

KEY FEATURED SPECIES

- Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*
- Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*
- Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*
- Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*
- Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*
- Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*

As birders, we must make the most of the short winter days. Harsh weather – be it freezing spells or inclement storms – pique the interest of patchbirders, for they have the potential to produce an assortment of displaced species.

High on the winter hit list are three scarce grebes – Black-necked, Red-necked and Slavonian – each of which would be a welcome reward for anyone prepared to brave the bitter cold and wind, whether on the coast or at their local inland waterbody, between October and March.

However, two much commoner species – Great Crested and Little Grebes – can offer pitfalls for the unwary and it's important to know their plumages and behaviours well. Furthermore, a rare North American vagrant that has the potential to show up just about anywhere – Pied-billed Grebe – is also addressed.

Field tips

As enjoyable as studying commoner species can be, the thrill of finding something unusual is what really gets many birders going. To boost their chances of detecting the scarcer grebes, coastal birders should turn their attention towards areas of shallow water: bays, estuary mouths, coastal lochs and harbours are all attractive to these birds in winter, particularly during periods of strong winds when such areas provide shelter. Seawatching vantage points could also produce, but be prepared for a good proportion of observations to be in flight.

Coastal grebes typically don't stray too far offshore given their preference for shallow water. Nevertheless, a telescope is essential – picking out a dainty waterbird on a choppy sea can be difficult enough, let alone identifying it. To further add to the fun, grebes spend a great deal of time foraging under water, so be patient and keep scanning. Dune ridges or clifftops can provide suitable vantage points to help look into troughs, although these spots are more likely to be exposed to the weather, so it's best to check the wind direction first and find somewhere sheltered.

Sites with congregations of seaduck such as Common Scoter should be the primary focus. Where you can find these, there are usually some grebes riding the waves nearby. Red-necked and Slavonian Grebes are the most likely scarce options in coastal localities, with Black-necked Grebe typically wintering in warmer waters further south and often preferring freshwater sites. That said, any section of coastline could produce these species, but most Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes winter in the North Sea, with smaller numbers along the English south coast.

If you're an inland birder, checking as many waterbodies as possible is key. Looking through old records will help to establish which sites are worth focusing attention on the most, but if there aren't many records of scarce grebes in your local area, identifying sites that attract decent numbers of wildfowl and commoner grebes will give a good indication of places with high food density.

Large inland reservoirs are irresistible to wintering grebes. If you don't live near such sites then fear not, as any reasonably sized waterbody will hold birds. Sailing lakes and gravel pits are examples of alternative sites to check.

As with many seasonal birds, bear in mind that some years will produce greater numbers than others. Scarce grebes will always be a feature of the winter months in Britain and Ireland, although favourable conditions can lead to influxes. For example, particularly cold spells on the Continent can cause arrivals as birds seek ice-free waters.

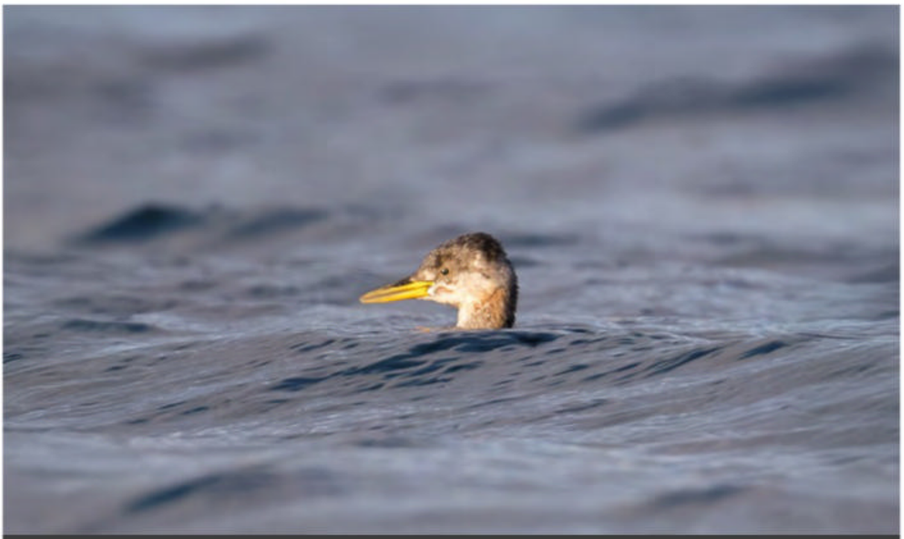
Waterbirds move around more as the cold bites and such conditions often push more coastal grebes inland, so be on high alert during periods of heavy snow or when temperatures drop below freezing. Some of the most fun I've had birding has been during such cold spells when my local gravel pits freeze over, and any lingering wildfowl move to the local rivers, which in turn can draw in a number of other species.

As is always the case, time in the field is by far the best way to improve your ID skills – literature never gives a complete picture of a bird's jizz, behaviour or personality. Remaining persistent and motivated will yield the greatest results, so keep going birding whenever time permits, manage your expectations – and remember to wrap up warm!

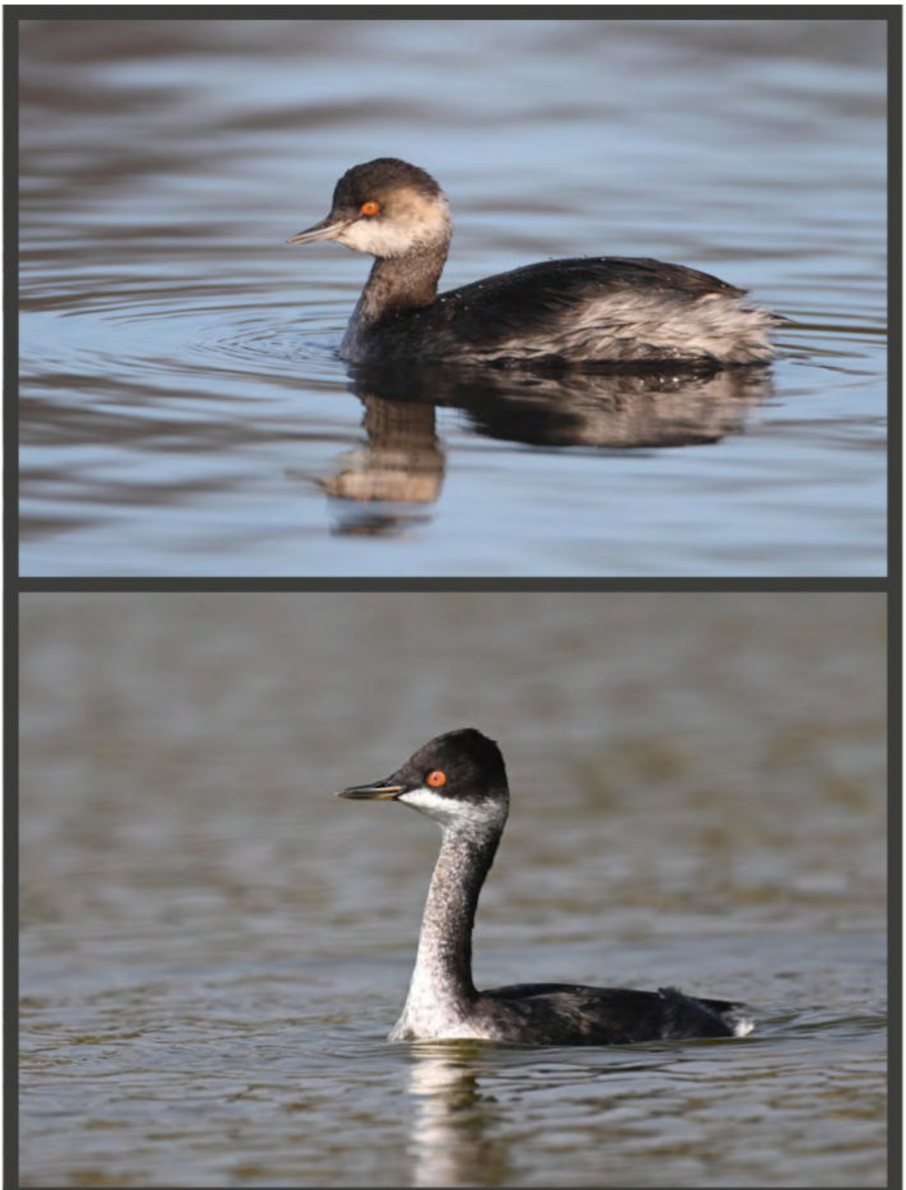
Great Crested and Red-necked Grebes

Great Crested is the largest grebe species encountered in Europe and is widespread throughout much of Britain and Ireland. It is usually the default grebe you'll see at your local wetland, but it also winters at sea. It is fairly straightforward to identify even at range, owing mostly to its unique structure. Sitting low in the water, the large size, long body, long, slim bill and long, thin neck create a snake-like appearance, unlike any other European grebe.

Plumage-wise, Great Crested is most comparable to Slavonian, being obviously black and white with a


IAN CURRAN

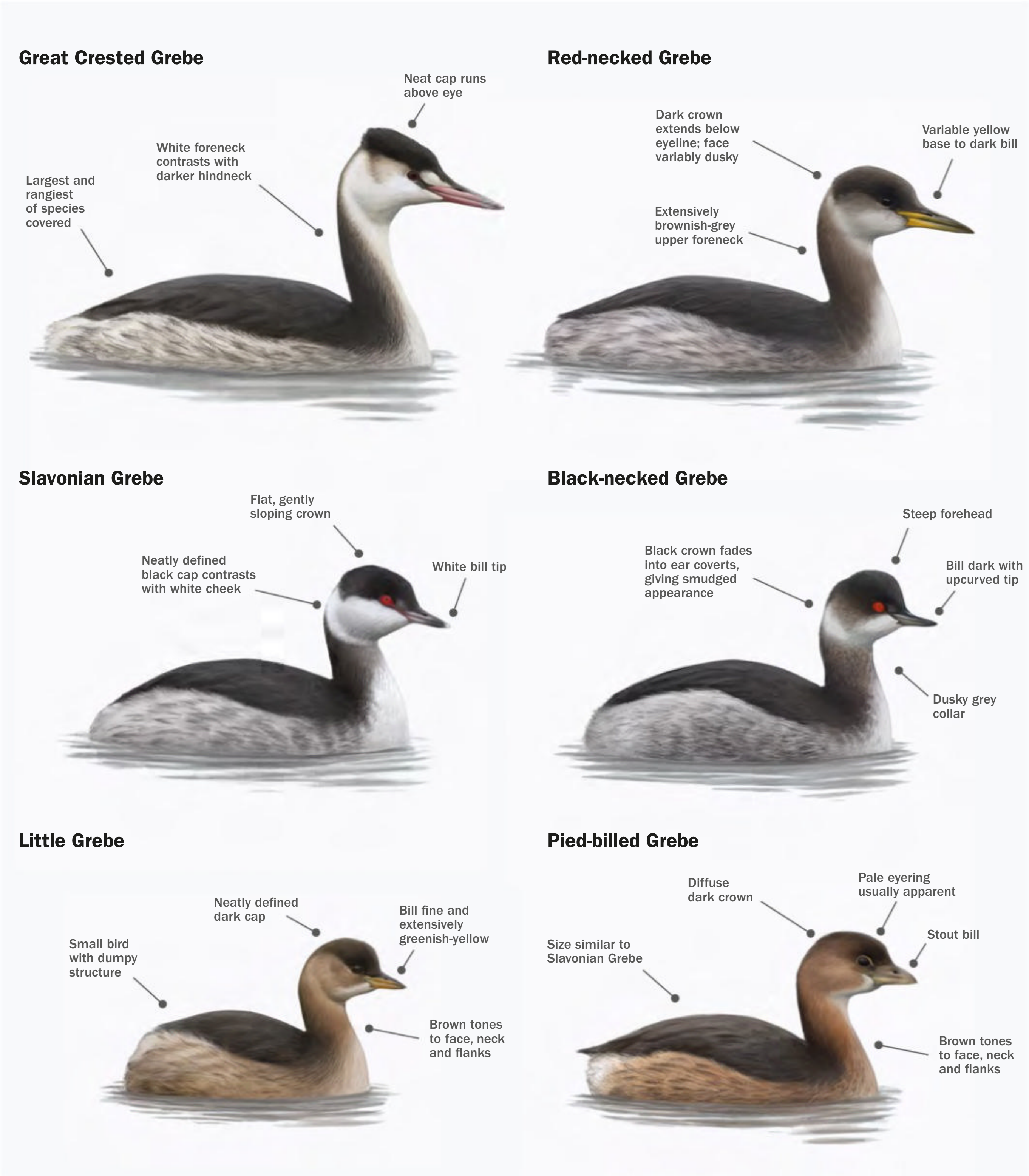
Patience is required when searching for grebes, especially on choppy days when they can easily disappear among the waves. What's more, when actively feeding, these birds spend long periods under water. The extensively yellow bill base on this bird identifies it as a Red-necked Grebe.


JIM ALMOND

NICK APPLETON

Structure can give plenty of clues as to a bird's identity, but bear in mind how it can change. These two Black-necked Grebes demonstrate how a bird's mood and posture can impact its appearance. In the upper image the bird has adopted a relaxed pose, while the bird in the lower photo is much more alert, sitting low in the water with an extended neck and flattened crown.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MILES CLUFF

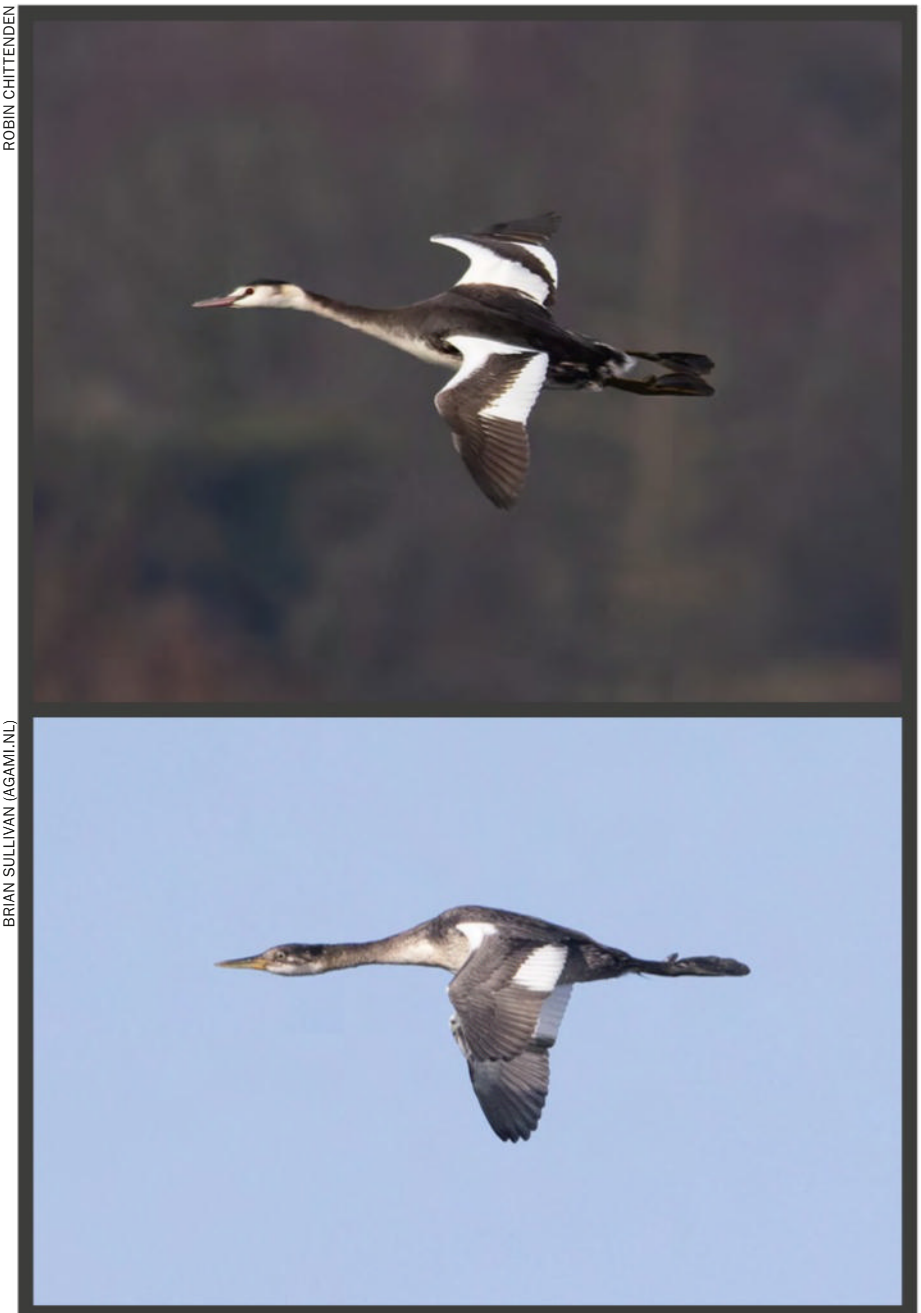

Great Crested Grebe
Largest and rangiest of species covered
White foreneck contrasts with darker hindneck
Neat cap runs above eye
Red-necked Grebe
Dark crown extends below eyeline; face variably dusky
Extensively brownish-grey upper foreneck
Variable yellow base to dark bill
Slavonian Grebe
Flat, gently sloping crown
Neatly defined black cap contrasts with white cheek
White bill tip
Black-necked Grebe
Black crown fades into ear coverts, giving smudged appearance
Steep forehead
Bill dark with upcurved tip
Dusky grey collar
Little Grebe
Small bird with dumpy structure
Neatly defined dark cap
Bill fine and extensively greenish-yellow
Brown tones to face, neck and flanks
Pied-billed Grebe
Size similar to Slavonian Grebe
Diffuse dark crown
Pale eyering usually apparent
Stout bill
Brown tones to face, neck and flanks

Above: Comparison of the six grebe species covered in this article while swimming, illustrating relative size, structure and plumage details.

dark crown that's neatly delineated from the crisp white cheek (although note that some individuals retain buff breeding-plumaged feathering in the cheek throughout winter). The dark cap finishes above the eye, unlike any of the other species covered here. The foreneck is clean white, lacking a collar and strongly contrasting with the black rear neck. Combined with a pink bill and obvious dark loral line, this makes for a distinctive bird.

Great Crested is easily identified in flight by its large size and long, skinny proportions. It shows a large white patch on the secondaries and an extensive white forewing patch that almost connects with the white on the secondaries at the base of the wing.

Red-necked is the scarcest of the regular grebe species and any encounter – coastal or inland – should be considered a success. The North Sea holds most of the wintering UK population (fewer than 100 individuals), although one or two usually appear at inland waterbodies. The east coast of Scotland is productive but the North Norfolk coast is also reliable. Harsher winters will see more continental birds pushed westwards to Britain, resulting in a better chance of finding one inland. Typically, Red-necked is solitary in



ROBIN CHITTENDEN

BRIAN SULLIVAN (AGAMI.NL)

Great Crested (upper bird) and Red-necked Grebes show the greatest extent of white in the wing, with both species having a white secondary panel and another white patch on the wing coverts. In Great Crested, these almost join at the base of the wing, but in Red-necked they are separated by a broad black bar. This is useful to note if watching a distant grebe in flight.

winter, unlike the more social Slavonian and Black-necked Grebes, which can often be seen in small groups.

This large, long-necked grebe is most reminiscent of Great Crested, although Red-necked is smaller and stockier with a relatively shorter and thicker neck, stouter bill and larger head, lacking the exaggerated 'swan-like' appearance of Great Crested. The dark crown of Red-necked extends down just below the eyeline, with a pale throat and area behind the ear coverts. The heavily smudged, dusky-brown foreneck and dusky ear coverts create a rather drab, washed-out appearance compared to the glowing white face of Great Crested. A standout feature from the other scarce grebes is a dark bill with a saturated yellow base. First-winter birds show more extensive yellow than winter-plumaged adults, but it should be obvious on all individuals. Despite being much smaller, Little Grebe is sometimes misidentified as Red-necked due to the dusky, dark-capped appearance and a pale-based bill.

In flight, Red-necked looks quite similar to Great Crested, although the white forewing patch is much smaller, the stockier proportions will be noticeable and the plumage should appear less strikingly black and white overall.

Black-necked and Slavonian Grebes

These species, monochromatic in winter, are often misidentified as each other, being similar in size, plumage and behaviour. They are the two more regular of the scarcer species and can be found in shallow, sheltered coastal waters or at inland freshwater bodies, so location alone can never be relied on as an ID feature.

Slavonian is typically a coastal species at this time of year, with most of the wintering British population (approximately 700 individuals) found in the North Sea, especially off eastern Scotland. Here, it's not uncommon to come across 10-20 birds at a single site, especially in the Firth of Forth or Moray Firth. A small number also spend the winter at inland waterbodies.

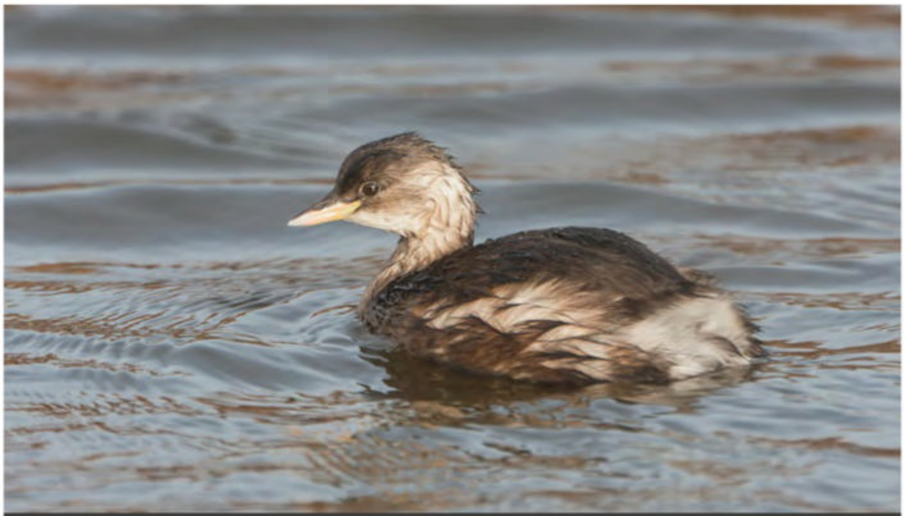
Black-necked is far scarcer given its preference for warmer climes, with some 120 individuals spending the winter in Britain, mostly in sheltered bays or harbours on the south coast of England. Honey-pot sites for this species include Poole Harbour and Studland Bay, Dorset; Langstone Harbour, Hampshire; and the Fal Estuary, Cornwall/Devon. The species is also found more regularly in fresh water, especially the reservoirs of the London area.

If you find yourself confronted with a small, black-and-white grebe, you'll be able to quickly eliminate the larger species and the buff-toned Little Grebe – but what's the next step? Structure can be a giveaway for both species: Slavonian is short bodied and has compact, stocky proportions, in tandem with a flat crown peaking at the rear, a sloping forehead and a short, straight, dagger-like bill. It appears to sit lower in the water than Black-necked. In fact, Slavonian more closely resembles a small, short-necked Great Crested Grebe, while in contrast Black-necked is structurally more reminiscent of a Little Grebe.

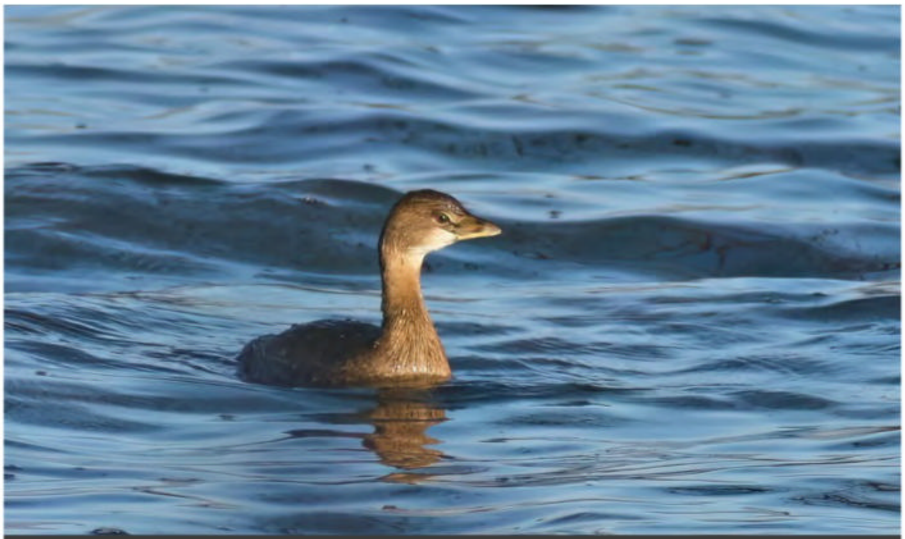
Black-necked is somewhat bizarre-looking, with a proportionally small head, short body and abrupt, puffed-up rear end. The crown peaks towards the centre of the head, just behind the eye, and the hindneck is more curved into the crown. Combined with a steep forehead, this gives off a strange triangular-headed profile. The bill is short and fine, much like Slavonian, but curved upwards towards the tip, creating a 'smiling' impression. The neck can appear almost non-existent when the bird is relaxed, but this can quickly change to tall and thin when alert. It's worth noting that just before and after diving, the crown will flatten, recalling Slavonian, so be wary if all you're getting are brief, distant glimpses between dives.

Slavonian exhibits a neatly pied appearance, exacerbated by a white cheek that is crisply demarcated from the black cap which ends just below the eye. The foreneck collar is thin and pale, again reminiscent of Great Crested. In Black-necked, the dark cap extends well below and to the rear of the eye, covering most of the ear coverts, giving off a dusky, smudged impression with less contrast than in Slavonian. The pale throat wraps around the back of the ear coverts, and the foreneck has a thick, dark grey collar that is more obvious than in Slavonian. If you're fortunate to come across a confiding individual of either species, you'll notice the crimson-red eye. At close range, a good feature to look for is the diagnostic pale bill tip of Slavonian, although this isn't easily detected at distance.

In flight, Slavonian is readily identified by the small, stocky proportions, with a white panel on the flight feathers that is restricted to the secondaries. On winter-plumaged adults, a white forewing patch is also visible, although first-winter birds can lack this feature. Black-necked has a larger white panel on the secondaries that diffuses into the inner primaries. It also completely lacks a white forewing patch at any age.


JAMES LOWEN

Some Little Grebes can be less hued with brown and buff tones, causing them to look rather more pale and contrasted and thus recalling Slavonian or Black-necked Grebes. However, the bird's tiny size and squat proportions should be noticeable, as should some buff colouring in the face, neck and flanks, while the bill is extensively pale yellowish.


SAM VILES

This bird, with its brown tones, diffuse cap, stout bill and somewhat large-headed appearance, would get a birder's pulse racing anywhere in Europe – it is a Pied-billed Grebe. This individual was present at a lake in Greater Manchester in November 2010.

Little and Pied-billed Grebes

Little Grebe is widespread across most of Britain and Ireland, but despite its familiarity it is often misidentified as something scarcer. Its appearance can be variable in winter, strangely combining features of each of the three scarcer grebe species. The overall brown-toned plumage and dark cap with a greenish bill base is reminiscent of Red-necked, while the small head, short, straight bill and short-bodied appearance is not dissimilar to Slavonian and Black-necked.

However, it is even shorter bodied and shorter necked than any of the previously mentioned species, with an abrupt, puffed-up rear end on show most of the time. The contrast between the face and dark cap is not as clear as on Slavonian and Black-necked, lacking the clean white of these species, but the dark cap should still be apparent. The clue is in the name, though, for the most obvious feature is the size – Little Grebe is tiny! This is accentuated by the short neck, bill and body, rendering it far daintier than the other species covered here. Little Grebe winters on freshwater lakes and reservoirs, but can also be found in sheltered coastal waters.

By far the rarest grebe in Europe is Pied-billed. Finding this North American species would make any birder's year, but past records show that one could turn up just about anywhere in Britain, no matter how far inland. Notable recent records from landlocked counties include birds in Shropshire, Greater Manchester and Rutland, so any 'Little-type' grebes should always be double-checked. Given how subtle this species can be, especially slimmer-billed individuals, some vagrants have surely slipped by unnoticed in the past.

In winter, Pied-billed essentially looks like a slightly larger Little Grebe, the most obvious difference being the thicker, stouter bill. The forehead is steep, with the species more akin to Black-necked in head structure. Pied-billed's head looks proportionately larger than Little's, giving a top-heavy appearance. Plumage tones are similar to Little, being warm buffy-brown overall. The other key difference from Little is the diffuse, subtle and restricted cap of Pied-billed – Little has an obvious demarcation between the face and the cap, with the cap uniform in darkness across the top of the head, similar to the other scarce grebe species, whereas Pied-billed's cap is darkest at the forehead, diffusing and attenuating at the rear of the head. In winter, Pied-billed shows a drab olive-green bill.

The undertail coverts of Pied-billed are cleaner white than in Little, which has a slight buffy-grey wash. However, given the underpart feathers are always damp and potentially dirty from foraging, this is a tricky feature to judge in the field. ■

SAM VILES

Above: Baikal Teal has a chequered history on the British list. The origins of records for this strikingly beautiful duck have been the subject of much discussion over the years.

Baikal Teal on the rise

From mega rarity to expected annual visitor in the space of a couple of decades, Baikal Teal records are on an upward trajectory in Britain and Europe. *Dan Owen* takes a look at the possible reasons for the increase.

Birders' scepticism towards vagrant wildfowl is a pronounced thing, with rarities sometimes deemed to be escapes (rightly or wrongly). The curse of 'showing too well' can consign even good records to the escape bin, while the fabled 'bread test' is often quoted as a measure of provenance. Wherever the line is drawn, there will always be margin for error. Individual circumstances are taken into account, but obviously this can cause good records to be written off as escapes and also iffy records to be accepted.

Enter Baikal Teal – a rather ornate dabbling duck from East Asia. The entire population breeds in eastern Siberia, with a wintering range including China, Japan and the Korean Peninsula. The status of Baikal Teal in both Britain and the wider Western Palearctic has long been controversial. Historic influxes into Europe have occurred, including in 1836 when five were in France. A breeding attempt was also reported in Iceland the following year. Quite where these birds originated from is unknown, but is it that far-fetched to assume they were all wild? Baikal Teal have been recorded 'going the other way' from breeding grounds, with many records of juvenile birds in Alaska in September and October. Others have been recorded in Hawaii and on Midway Atoll, plus a few on the Eastern Seaboard of North America.

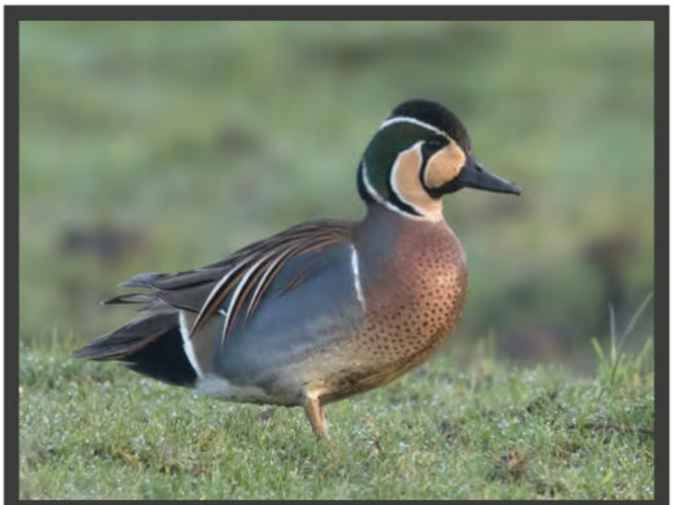
The global population has been in a state of flux but is currently doing very well. Listed as Threatened by BirdLife International until 1994, Baikal Teal was moved to Vulnerable and then to Least Concern from 2011. Excessive hunting is often quoted as the main driver for population decline, but a reduction in hunting pressures and newly reclaimed wintering sites are seeing an upturn in wintering flocks. It's hard to estimate the global population but it is thought it could possibly be as high as 1 million breeding pairs.

South Korea holds the most important wintering sites, and the total has increased greatly from some 20,000 counted in the 1980s to 658,000 in 2004. The Geum River is of special importance and hosted 600,000 of the birds counted in the 2004 surveys. This total continues to rise, with estimates of 800,000 at the same site in early 2024. The migration route is still largely unknown. Birds typically reach their breeding grounds in April-May and often leave in late August-September, before arriving back at wintering sites in October.

Captive collections

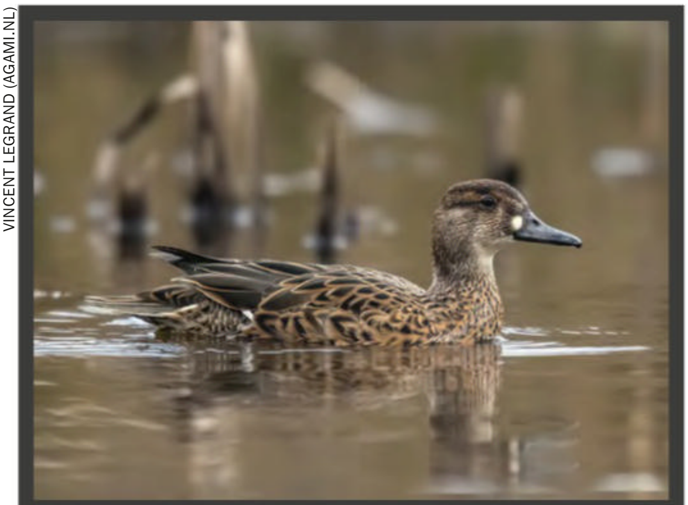
As with many duck species, Baikal Teal can be found in collections globally. Owing to the attractive appearance of drakes, it has long been a popular

GRAHAM JEPSON



Drake Baikal Teal is among the prettiest of all duck, with a jasmine-green nape, dark crown, cream cheeks and long, drooping scapulars.

VINCENT LEGRAND (AGAMI.NL)



The eye-catching face pattern, along with the speculum pattern, are useful when identifying females such as this bird in Belgium in 2021.

HENRY WYN-JONES

Despite the distinctive appearance when seen alone, drake Baikal Teal can be surprisingly inconspicuous when tucked in among thousands of dabbling duck. This bird (third from right, bottom) was with Eurasian Wigeon at Swine Moor, East Yorkshire, from January-April 2022.

species in captivity. Indeed, at the time of writing a pair can be purchased for a mere £210! However, it is said to be a difficult species to breed in captivity, and thus there has been a slight decline in the market in recent years.

The species' relationship with the British list has been rocky. A sight record of a female-type on Fair Isle in 1954 was accepted as wild, while five records prior to this, and several since, were all subsequently accepted to Category A. The first-winter drake shot in Co Fermanagh in January 1967 was also accepted onto the Irish list. However, the bird was re-aged as an adult and later removed. Furthermore, the 10 British records were reassessed due to an issue with the identification of the Fair Isle sighting. As a result, some records were admitted to Category D1 and others are now deemed to be unproven.

Stable-hydrogen isotope analysis conducted on a first-winter Baikal Teal shot in Denmark in November 2005 strongly suggested that bird had occurred as a natural vagrant to Europe. This same isotope analysis was then carried out on a first-winter drake collected in Essex in January 1906, which also revealed strikingly similar results to the Danish bird, with the retained juvenile feathers more than likely having been grown in Siberia. Therefore, it was deemed the bird occurred as a natural vagrant and the species was re-added to the British list.

The number of British records since the turn of the century is into double figures, although some have been rejected. Of these, perhaps the most controversial was a well-travelled drake in spring 2019. The bird first turned up at Welney WWT, Norfolk, on 20 March, and was later refound further along the Ouse Washes in Cambridgeshire on 28 April. During the course of the spring, the bird was tracked to the Nene Washes, then later to Spurn YWT and Hornsea Mere, East Yorkshire, before heading further north still into Scotland, at Skinflats Lagoons, Forth. It then resided in Northumberland until 9 July. This late date was seen as an obstacle for acceptance and thus the bird was deemed to be of unknown origin.

GRID-ARENDAL

The world population of Baikal Teal has increased significantly during the last few decades, with large counts being made on the species' wintering grounds in East Asia. This flock was photographed in South Korea, where national surveys have estimated 800,000 individuals in recent winters.

Increase in records

Another drake was photographed resting by a coastal swimming pool in Aberdeenshire on 10 May 2023. This record was also rejected as the bird's provenance couldn't be decided. While it may seem dodgy at first glance, a migrant pausing at a coastal waterbody (artificial or otherwise) on the north-east coast at a similar latitude to the breeding range perhaps isn't as whacky as it might seem. The bird was unringed and flew off approximately an hour after it was found.

One of the most convincing recent records was a drake with Eurasian Wigeon on Fair Isle from 29 September-4 October 2021. This appeared at a time when other eastern vagrants were arriving, including a White's Thrush. Other recent birds include a drake and a female on the Somerset Levels among large flocks of Eurasian Teal and Eurasian Wigeon. A drake was also discovered with a flock of Northern Pintail at Foryd Bay, Gwynedd, in early 2023.

So, what is a 'good' record? Well, the right time of year is important, with accepted records occurring between September and April. A midsummer record is likely to raise a few eyebrows and red flags. The bird(s) should ideally be found among the appropriate carrier species: Eurasian Teal, Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Pintail are deemed most suitable and flocks of all three, or a combination of each, have produced the good majority of accepted European records.

While it's possible that birds may reorientate themselves back to the home range, it's also likely that some simply now linger all year in Europe, summering unseen in the expanses of Northern Europe, then returning to wintering sites such as in Britain. This seems a likely explanation for the repeat occurrence of a drake at Greylake RSPB, Somerset, in winter 2021-22 and again in winter 2023-24. Of course, the appearance of first-winter birds shows that new vagrants are consistently arriving as well.

Despite an upward trajectory in the core range and the likelihood of a handful of birds now residing in Europe, Baikal Teal will always remain a prize find and a bird well worth seeing. I'm sure that a repeat of the 19th-century influxes wouldn't go amiss, although a breeding attempt would likely be treated with a high level of scrutiny from a modern recording body.

Whatever the case, Baikal Teal has become more regular in Britain in recent years. In January 2025, the species will be downgraded from Mega to Rare status on the BirdGuides sightings service to reflect the observed uptick in records. ■

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DANIELE OCCHIATO (AGAMI.NL)

Lights out for birds

Nocturnal light pollution disorientates and kills millions of birds annually worldwide. *Dr Emily Joáchim* outlines this growing problem and considers how it can be tackled.

Our night skies are brighter than ever before. A light-pollution study led by CPRE, The Countryside Charity, found that only 22% of England, 57% of Wales and 77% of Scotland still have truly dark skies at night. Urban areas are most impacted by light pollution, where night skies are typically 14-23 times brighter than natural levels of darkness. On a moonless night the Milky Way is no longer visible to 77% of the population, and the 2023 CPRE Star Count showed that 51% of participants could see 10 or fewer stars in the Orion constellation.

On average, the use of artificial light at night (ALAN) is increasing by 10% per annum, with skyglow and dimly and brightly lit areas all increasing in predominantly urban areas, but also in many rural areas. There is growing evidence that light pollution is negatively impacting wildlife.

This disruption of natural dark-light cycles affects nocturnal and diurnal species alike. To date, we know that ALAN acts as a barrier to movement for nocturnal animals; gives predators an unfair advantage over prey species; causes bats to abandon or be entombed in illuminated roosts; obscures bioluminescent displays in glow-worms; and kills a third of light-lured insects.

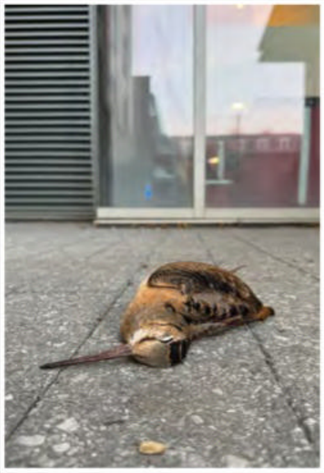
It can also impact ecological communities. For example, ALAN advances budburst in deciduous trees, with cascade effects on the moth and bird species which synchronise their life cycle with the trees. Overall, there is no doubt that ALAN is harming the natural world – it has recently been identified as an overlooked driver of the catastrophic insect population declines we are witnessing, and light pollution is recognised as a major anthropogenic hazard to the many bird species that migrate at night.

DON SNIEGOWSKI

McCormick Place in Chicago, USA, is notorious for killing large numbers of migrant birds due to being lit up at night. Almost 70,000 corpses have been collected at the foot of this glass-pannelled building since 1978.

DOUGLAS BOYES

New-style LED lights are brighter than the previously used orange-hued sodium lamps. These not only affect birds, having also been proven to have negative impacts on insect populations.



OSU ORNITHOLOGY CLUB

American (pictured) and Eurasian Woodcock are easily disorientated by urban lights, sadly resulting in frequent window strikes.

Main image: European Robin is well known for singing throughout the hours of darkness in urban areas due to artificial light.

Migrant birds

Nocturnally migrating birds have evolved to navigate dark night skies between their breeding and wintering grounds. This includes many species of songbirds, waterfowl and shorebirds. Now, because of ALAN, these birds are forced to navigate increasingly bright migration routes.

Early studies of bird migration took place at lighthouses and on lightships, with keepers noting that birds were more likely to strike lanterns on a low-cloud night, especially those with mist, fog or precipitation. There continue to be records of multitudes of migrating birds being killed in a single night. For example, Bardsey Lighthouse, Gwynedd, attracted 40,000 birds to the island one night in 2003; hundreds collided with the lighthouse, and thousands have been killed this way since 1821. Consequently, the lights there were changed from white to red hue in 2014 to help prevent many more exhausted birds being drawn to their deaths.

Every spring and autumn, migratory birds are lured by light pollution into urban areas at night. As birds pass over towns and cities, artificial lights and skyglow disrupt instinctive migratory behaviours and disorientated birds are at high risk of dying from exhaustion, predation or in collisions with buildings, bridges and windows. An illuminated tall building can kill hundreds of birds each night. A well-known example is the glass-fronted McCormick Place in Chicago. Since 1978, ornithologists have collected 69,785 bird-strike victims at the foot of this building. On 5 October 2023, more than 1,000 birds collided with the building in a single night, with the bodies of American Woodcock and many songbirds, including Tennessee Warbler and Hermit Thrush, found.

Mass mortality

In the US overall, between 100 million and 1.3 billion birds are killed by collisions with buildings each year, with warblers, thrushes, sparrows and other nocturnally migrating species suffering the most fatalities. Of all cities in the US, Chicago's light pollution poses the greatest risk for migrating birds. As a result, Audubon and partners have established Lights Out Programs for birds in 31 US cities. It urges building owners to sign a pledge to dim lights between midnight and dawn during spring and autumn migrations as a way to reduce fatalities, with a 2021 observational study at McCormick Place in Chicago concluding that shutting off half the lights in large buildings can reduce collisions by 11 times in spring and six times in autumn, and that bird mortality could be reduced by 60% here by decreasing the illuminated window areas.

In 2024, Patricia Homonylo won the prestigious Bird Photographer of the Year contest with her powerful image, *When Worlds Collide*, which shows almost 4,000 birds that perished striking windows in Toronto, Canada. This display of dead birds was to honour the lives lost and increase public awareness of the Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP) which aims to reduce the 'fatal light' given off from buildings during migration. This includes reflection, and internal and external ALAN.

Another well-known example of the impact of ALAN on birds is at the annual Tribute in Light art installation at the site of the 9/11 Memorial in New York. It consists of 88 vertical searchlights arranged in two columns to represent the World Trade Center. Without intervention, many thousands of migrating birds would become trapped in the light during peak periods. To prevent unnecessary harm to birds, volunteers monitor bird numbers every 20 minutes. Once these reach 1,000, the lights are turned off for 20 minutes so the migratory birds can regain their bearings and fly away safely.

Less is known about the direct and indirect impacts of light pollution on birds here in the UK. In 2019, the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) deployed passive acoustic recorders across a gradient of artificial lighting to record the flight calls of migrating Blackbird, Song Thrush and Redwing, finding that calling rates were up to five times higher over the brightest urban areas compared with darker villages, suggesting that birds were attracted to the artificial lighting as in other European studies.

Most UK councils are rapidly replacing the orange-hued sodium lamps with broad-spectrum LED street lighting, with growing evidence that this is exacerbating the negative impact of ALAN on wildlife. With an estimated 7.5 million street lights in the UK, this is the most radical change in street lighting since the Industrial Revolution.

LED astray

While these retrofits cut costs and save energy, LED lights are brighter and emit more light at the blue end of the spectrum, and so even when councils follow guidelines, this change can impact avifauna including Red-Listed birds. For example, thousands of murmurating Common Starlings above the Albert Bridge in Belfast were thought to have been displaced after the street lighting was converted to LED. During spring 2023, red filters were placed on lights at the side of the bridge, with blanking screens on lanterns underneath, and the starlings returned the following winter.

LED lighting can disorientate birds. Every autumn, the RSPB receives almost daily calls from the public about Eurasian Woodcock sighted in city-centre streets or sat in gardens following residential window collisions. This low-flying wader follows rivers on migration at night, and experts believe that the Red-Listed species cannot see nearby buildings or windows due to ALAN. In the town of St Helier on Jersey, 10 woodcock were found dead following window strikes in 2020 alone. Extrapolate this across the entirety of Britain and it quickly becomes a significant figure.

Affected species

Puffins, storm petrels and shearwaters are especially sensitive to ALAN because their young fledge at night. Coastal light pollution attracts the young seabirds as they take their first flights. Many become grounded when disorientated by ALAN along shorelines, and those that cannot take off again die from injury, predation or starvation. Mass mortality events can occur.

Light pollution has also been shown to affect the behaviour and phenology of birds by altering an individual's daily rhythm. European Robin, Blackbird and Great Tit were more likely to start their dawn chorus earlier in the year at sites with artificial night lighting, and also sing later at night due to an extended twilight from ALAN. It is common to hear robins singing all night in urban areas.

The Amber-Listed Tawny Owl is another species that is negatively impacted by light pollution, with the BTO's 2018-19 Tawny Owl Calling Survey concluding that the two strongest factors that influenced whether or not the species was present at a site were the amount of broadleaf woodland cover and the amount of ALAN, the latter a measure of the degree of urbanisation.

While most bird species are negatively impacted by light pollution, research by the University of Exeter suggested that ALAN may benefit Common Redshanks in the Firth of Forth, Scotland. Using radio transmitters to monitor how often the birds put their heads down to feed, the study concluded that ALAN enabled redshanks to forage more efficiently using sight over probing only, which may benefit the waders during the darker winter months by extending the hours they can forage more effectively.

KIT DAY

Fascinatingly, the illumination of mudflats by ALAN has been suggested as a positive for Common Redshank in the Firth of Forth, Scotland, with the bright lights affording the species the opportunity to forage more efficiently throughout the night.

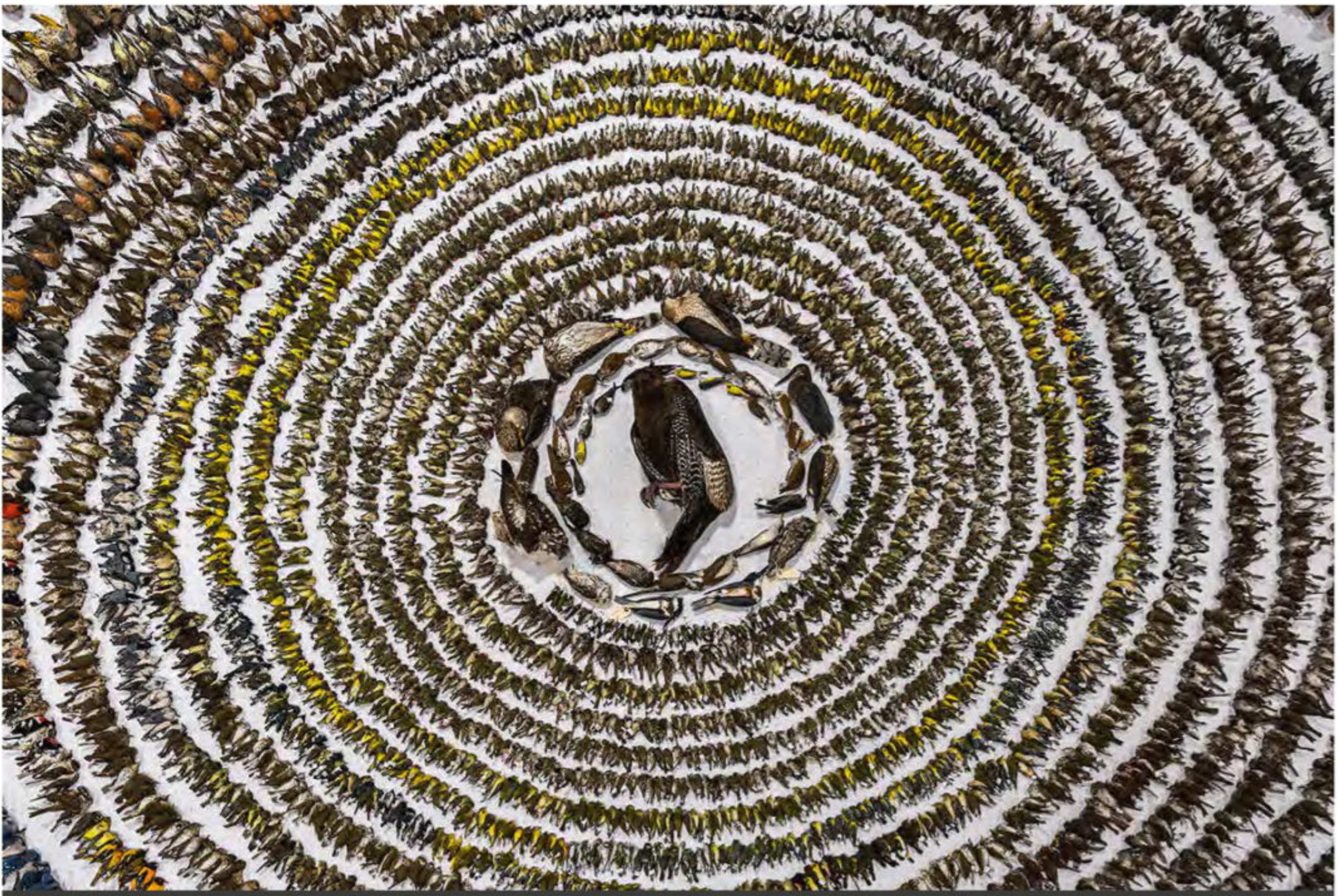
Bringing back dark skies

The good news is that unlike most other anthropogenic pollutants, light pollution is instantly reversible and we can all make a difference now. First, we must learn to value natural darkness more and reconnect with dark skies. Urban darkness is seen as unnatural and unsafe and this needs to be addressed. Artificial light is blurring the boundary between day and night. The UK Government must recognise that nature has a fundamental right to darkness at night and introduce new laws and policies to protect the natural world from light pollution.

Local authorities must adjust street lighting regimes to fit in with crepuscular and nocturnal wildlife, while also looking to establish dark wildlife corridors and refuges in urban areas from dusk. Introducing these corridors will be challenging. To be effective, we must limit light trespass and glare from nearby areas, ensure that the corridors and refuges are dark enough to maintain natural ecosystem processes and reconnect suitable foraging and breeding habitat. Street lighting should be dimmed or switched off in the surrounding areas.

It is indefensible that businesses continue to leave their lights on overnight. Since 2007, the annual Earth Hour event has encouraged businesses and cities to turn off non-essential electric lights. Lights Out London also sought to encourage businesses to change their behaviour and switch off lights at night. Despite such campaigns, businesses continue to unnecessarily illuminate their facades, signage and window displays during hours of darkness. It is paramount that new measures are introduced to tackle this completely avoidable light pollution to help birds and other wildlife. This could be promoted through a 'Lights Out for Nature' campaign.

A mandatory 'Lights Out for Birds' initiative, where all lights are switched off from 10 pm on historical buildings, monuments, skyscrapers and publicly owned buildings during peak bird



PATRICIA HOMONYLO

Patricia Homonylo won the prestigious Bird Photographer of the Year 2024 award with her shocking image entitled *When Worlds Collide*, which shows almost 4,000 birds of 103 species that perished as a result of striking windows in Toronto, Canada, in 2022 alone.

migration periods could be implemented here. As many of our nocturnally migrating birds are declining, it is important that we do all that we can to help them on their migration routes.

ANDREW3457 VIA WIKIMEDIA

A recent BTO survey found that Tawny Owl numbers decreased in more brightly lit urban areas.

What the future holds

By 2025, LED lights are expected to comprise 90% of the global lighting market, compared with just 9% in 2011. There is no national policy to switch to LED, yet these lights are rapidly being installed without adequate research into their impact on birds on other wildlife. We urgently need rigorous, independent and collaborative studies to determine the impacts of widespread white LED light pollution on species, populations, communities and ecosystems at night. Manipulating LED colour temperature is one potential intervention to reduce impact of harmful blue light.

As individuals we can all make a difference and often the solution is as simple as turning off lights in our homes, gardens and work places. Light pollution from our homes is hazardous for nocturnally migrating birds and a third of those which collide with windows sadly die. With 27.2 million households in the UK, it is essential that we all take measures to minimise our own light pollution. This includes closing curtains and windows in lit rooms, switching off lights in vacant rooms, turning off lights when asleep, choosing bulbs with minimal blue light and dimming lights where possible. During the festive and winter months, there is a trend for outdoor lighting. Do we need to do this? In these darker months, we have the honour of hosting many beautiful overwintering species, passerines and non-passerines alike, and as a collective, we must do all we can to keep them safe.

For further practical advice on reducing artificial light at night, please visit **www.darksky.org**. ■

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Solid support

Strength, stability and impressive control were the standout features evident when *Mike Alibone* unfolded the impressive latest addition to the Vanguard tripod range.

REVIEW

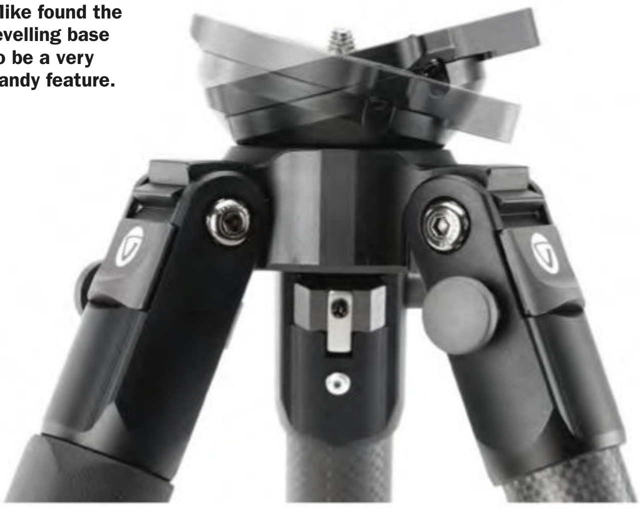
Vanguard Alta Pro 3VL 303CV 18 Carbon Fibre Tripod with levelling base and video head

LAUNCHED late in 2023, this is a smart carbon-fibre tripod with a levelling base that is currently only available as part of a kit that includes the brand's VEO PV-18 video head.

At first glance, it piqued my interest as a potential combination of elements that, from a birding perspective, appeared to offer users virtually everything they could possibly want for comfortable and precise operation in the field. As things turned out, this perception proved correct, with the kit living up to expectations while putting it through its birding paces.

'Paces' being the operative word in this instance as the majority of the testing was carried out during a week spent in the Isles of Scilly, in which daily hikes often exceeded 8 km, with the tripod being carried over my shoulder. The carbon-fibre construction went a long way to reducing the carry weight, its 1,740 g being much lighter than the equivalent aluminium model (weighing 2,440 g).

Immediately evident is the tripod's lack of a centre column. It doesn't need one – when fully extended, the three leg sections provide a raised apical platform height of 1,680 mm to the top of the levelling base and the addition of the head moves this figure up to 1,800 mm before attaching a telescope or camera. This exceptional height may raise a few eyebrows and some might see it as going a step too far by adding more leg weight to the tripod than may actually be necessary.



Mike found the levelling base to be a very handy feature.

The angle of the leg sections can be quickly and easily altered to 23°, 50° or 80° by pressing the circular spring-button at the top of each leg, which allows the tripod to descend to a low level of 290 mm. The leg sections are smoothly surfaced and each slides in and out with ease. Only one of the three upper sections has an additional outer covering – in this instance it's a 164-mm-long sheath of sturdy rubber, no doubt added to facilitate one-hand carrying. Although not significantly heavy, it is of little use if the tripod is being carried over the user's shoulder or supported by a backpack. It could be cut through and completely removed if so desired.

I found the levelling base a boon. When using the tripod on a slope, or on uneven ground, there is no necessity to alter the individual leg lengths to bring the equipment supported by it into the horizontal position. A quick turn of a built-in key at the tripod's apex enables the leveller to be rapidly adjusted in order to compensate for the uneven surface below the legs, effectively restoring the horizontal setting of the tripod head. The levelling base rotates through a full 360° and by +/- 15° vertically. Its integrated spirit level enables the accuracy of the setting.

The tripod's feet are roundly rubber-covered but they are screw-mounted, providing the option to quickly spin and retract each one up the leg by 13 mm, exposing spiked feet which are useful if the tripod is being used on a slippery or unstable surface.

The head includes some neat applications. While there is a standard 360° panning lock, there are two control aspects associated with the tilting function. Situated above the panning lock is a small, tilt-dampening handle, the purpose of which is to alter the resistance to the vertical tilt operation. Tightening it applies more resistance to the tilting process, whereas loosening it results in smoother, lighter and quicker tilting.

I found in instances where the telescope is on high magnification while watching or digiscoping a bird, engaging the dampener reduced the chances of losing it from the field of view when making slight adjustments to follow its movements.

These vertical tilt adjustments are made using a separate short

THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL INCLUDES:

MIKE ALIBONE is *Birdwatch*'s Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than 20 years.

KEITH BETTON is Chairman of the Hampshire Ornithological Society and previously served as Hampshire County Recorder.

ED STUBBS is BirdGuides and *Birdwatch*'s Deputy Editor and has a keen interest in migration and patchbirding.

JOSH JONES is Editor of *Birdwatch*. He has been an ardent birder since a young age, with a particular fondness for waders and gulls.

arm with a 35-mm diameter knob that allows you to securely lock the tilt angles between -45° and +90°. There are two spirit levels on the head which complement the one on the levelling base.

It should be noted that there is no automatic spring-levelling on the vertical tilt as employed by some other tripod models.

Two pan handles are supplied in order that they can both be fitted, left and right of the head, to provide more stable, two-handed control if desired. Their lengths can be extended by a simple twist-lock mechanism built into the arms.

The clamp on the head is ARCA-compatible and includes a spring-based safety button which prevents the quick-release plate (QRP) from accidentally sliding out. After loosening the ARCA-style QRP, pressing a small silver button on the side of the platform releases it.

Pleasingly, the QRP includes a standard anti-rotation pin compatible with the majority of telescope tripod feet and the plate's attachment screw also includes a small ring, which means that it can be tightened up by hand if it works loose in the field.

The ARCA-style plate delivers flexibility insomuch as it slides to adjust the balance of a telescope on the tripod when its centre of gravity is changed after attaching a camera or mobile phone to the eyepiece. A number of the more innovative scope manufacturers, including Vanguard, have designed their tripod feet in the ARCA style, which means the QRP can be ditched, providing a much more stable and adjustable set-up when mounting a 'scope.

The Vanguard Alta Pro 3VL 303CV 18 Carbon Fibre Tripod with levelling base and video head is sold as a complete kit and comes with a soft, padded shoulder bag with an internal zip pocket. This is a very nice piece of kit although, arguably, the legs may perhaps be considered too long and, compared to some similar set-ups, it is not the lightest of its kind on the market.

The tripod lacks a centre column, for its legs extend to a height of 1,680 mm.

The tripod feed are roundly rubber-covered but also screw-mounted.

Nonetheless it is very user-friendly, competitively priced and represents very good value for money.

For a working demonstration, watch the BirdGuides video at **bit.ly/AltaProreview24**. ■

More info

- **Price:** £449.99 (legs and head complete); VEO PV-18 head £159.99 if purchased alone
- **Material:** carbon fibre
- **Weight:** legs 1,740 g, VEO PV-18 head 1,180 g
- **Maximum support weight:** 15 kg excluding head
- **Collapsed length:** 855 mm including head
- **Maximum height:** 1,800 mm
- **Leg sections:** three
- **Leg-locking system:** twist
- **Guarantee:** two years, extendable to 10 years

Verdict

✓ ARCA-compatible head
✓ Levelling base is effective
✗ Height may be too much for some

Birds and boughs

BIRDING with a healthy dose of curiosity takes you into unexpected areas. Many questions are simple but most answers become complex. Who knows where they may lead?

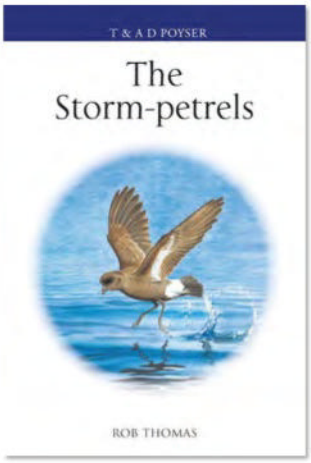
We know, more or less, what a bird is – but what is a tree? There is no easy definition. Trees and birds have been co-existing for millions of years, to the benefit of one or the other or both, and sometimes to the detriment of the tree. Who knew that trees send chemical messages to their neighbours if they are under attack by parasitic larvae, and that birds might intercept these and home in on the feast? That African tree species can warn others that giraffes are about, so they should quickly produce distasteful chemicals to protect themselves, is another story.

This book is a classic example of how having a questioning attitude to the world around us can result in received wisdom: look, think, wonder and see where it gets you. It is full of fascinating, remarkable, enjoyable and stimulating content. ***Rob Hume***

More info

- *Of the Trees and the Birds* by Ian Parsons (Whittles Publishing, 2024).
- 176 pages, 35 colour photographs.
- ISBN: 9781849955744. Pbk, £18.99.

A real stormer



MOST British birders rarely get to see storm petrels, yet some species are among the most numerous birds in the world. It is a fascinating group, some taxa of which are only just revealing their secrets to us – such as Ringed Storm Petrel, whose breeding grounds were found in Chile's Atacama Desert in 2017.

This book comes when interest in these birds is at an all-time high, with new species being described and swelling the number of family members to 28. Indeed, more are likely to be split as DNA lifts the lid on their taxonomy.

Dr Rob Thomas specialises on the behavioural responses of birds to changing environments and has been involved in storm-petrel studies since the age of 16. Although there are many books on seabirds, this is the first definitive work on storm petrels. Rob has focused on European Storm Petrel but this book tackles all the species within the family, 18 and 10 of which breed in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres respectively.

There are opening chapters detailing the family and what makes storm petrels different from other petrels. For a start, they are tiny, and their wings are much shorter but considerably broader in relation to body length than in other petrels. Additionally, their legs are proportionally much longer than those of other petrels.

Diet and foraging behaviours are discussed and although we generally see storm petrels fluttering around just above the surface, they will occasionally dive in search of food, making a shallow plunge directly from the air, quickly reappearing and immediately taking off again. They feed both during the day and night and their diet consists of crustaceans, cephalopods and fish.

Next up is a dive into the storm petrels' sensory world, which reveals that they have substantially enhanced olfactory abilities to locate food using smell. But these abilities extend to identifying mates and navigating to breeding locations. Magnetoreception is likely to be important in this amazing ability and remains an area that we are only beginning to understand.

In a chapter on tracking, we learn that so far very few storm petrels have been studied in this way. From work mostly conducted in the North Atlantic and North Pacific we are learning that the different sexes often use different feeding areas. Over time the development of more advanced tracking systems is likely to uncover much more.

These remarkably resilient birds do suffer from predation. Many of them nest in colonies where they can be easy targets for other birds such as owls, gulls, skuas, crows and small raptors. Mammals, in particular mustelids and mongooses, also target colonies, and there is even a case of Black Bears causing chaos at a colony. Humans have also been predators, and in western North America, storm petrels used to be exploited for food, oil or fish bait.

As with most seabirds, the evidence so far is that the impacts of climate change are diverse but largely negative. In addition to this, the bioaccumulation of chemical pollutants in marine prey may well be a problem. Plus, for those that have become used to free hand-outs, the changing supply of fishery discards is an ever-present challenge.

Two chapters examine in detail all of the storm-petrel species with information on identification, distribution and much more. In some cases that information is still lacking, and there are plenty of avenues to research.

A fascinating chapter looks at storm petrels in human culture. It has long been said by sailors that touching a storm petrel that has strayed on board a ship is a sign of bad luck – even death. Thankfully, most people ignore this claim.

Having read this book you'll want to see some storm petrels, so there is a list of sites to visit and advice on when to get lucky. I am certain it will make the reader respect the immense abilities of these birds. They may be small, but storm petrels are superbly built for harsh marine environments, and this book celebrates those adaptations. ***Keith Betton***

Bookshop from £55

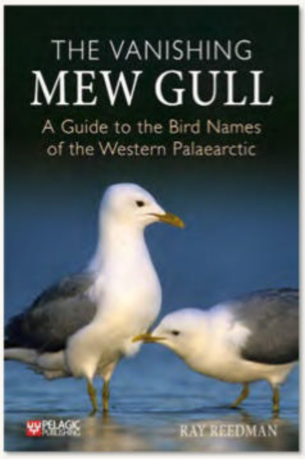
More info

- *The Storm-petrels* by Rob Thomas (Bloomsbury, 2024).
- 336 pages; 160 photographs, artworks, maps and diagrams.
- Hbk, £60 (ISBN: 9781472985811). Pbk, £35 (ISBN: 9781472985828).

Bird names explained

IF you're looking to expand your knowledge of Western Palearctic (WP) birds then Ray Reedman's recently published book will be right up your street. *The Vanishing Mew Gull* is an amalgamation of Reedman's vast expertise on bird nomenclature, focusing on some 1,100 species that have been recorded in the WP (including a few in a non-wild state). So complete is this work that even left-field Category C species such as Erckel's Spurfowl have been addressed.

Presented in taxonomic order, the book offers short synopses for every treated species, in which relevant detail and facts are presented. This importantly includes an explanation of or reasoning behind their names, of which both English and scientific are covered, but also provides some background to the species in question, such as range, distribution and status.



Be prepared to learn plenty! While there will undoubtedly be facts and definitions that many birders will have already come across, there is a stack of new material here which will doubtless be well received by the reader. Did you know that the scientific name of Common Rosefinch, *Carpodacus erythrinus*, translates as 'red fruit-biter'? Or that Canvasback's species name, *valisineria*, refers to one of the bird's favoured foodplants, a type of water celery, that in turn commemorates an Italian botanist? Or that the scientific name for Black Scrub Robin, *podobe*, refers to the distinctive white-tipped undertail pattern?

> "The book's format is pleasantly easy to navigate or to dip in and out of at will. I found it addictive and absorbing"

The book's format is pleasantly easy to navigate or to dip in and out of at will, making it a very handy reference guide for the bookshelf. I found it addictive and absorbing. There is little doubt that this title will appeal to any bird enthusiast, from the passing hobbyist keen to learn more to the most seasoned of ornithologists and academics. ***Josh Jones***

Bookshop from £60

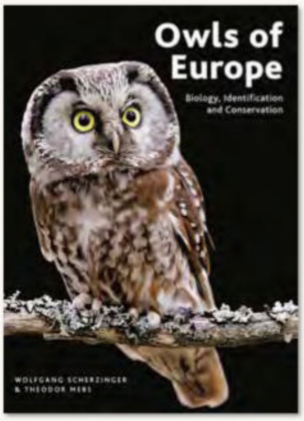
More info

- *The Vanishing Mew Gull: A Guide to the Bird Names of the Western Palearctic* by Ray Reedman (Pelagic, 2024).
- 398 pages, 17 black-and-white photos.
- ISBN: 9781784274627. Hbk, £65.

All owl knowledge

OWLS are among the most popular of all birds. Europe is lucky to boast 14 species, many of which are among the most celebrated in the world – Great Grey and Snowy Owls and Northern Hawk-Owl, for example. *Owls of Europe* by Heimo Mikkola, published in 1983, was a seminal work and is one of the finest titles that graces my bookshelf, so I was intrigued to see how this latest (unrelated) *Owls of Europe* stacked up.

The early sections of the book introduce owls as a family, touching on their features, shared characteristics, various adaptations, behaviour, biology and conservation. These pages are nicely laid out, with a welcome mix of copy, tables and charts and imagery. Some of the tables, such as the pellet comparison one on page 46, are especially interesting, while the habitat preference chart on page 94 has a nice visual element to it.



The book then delves into the different species of European owl, all of which have their own chapter (bar Cyprus Scops Owl, a recent split which is acknowledged as such). These species accounts are rich in information and illustrated wonderfully with a range of photos and sketches. For each species, up-to-date European distribution maps and the latest country-by-country population estimates are included, along with information on vocalisations, behaviour, breeding biology, life strategies, hunting, prey and habitat requirements. I'm a big fan of data visualisation and *Owls of Europe* excels in this – the breakdown of Eurasian Eagle-Owl prey and the Tengmalm's Owl nest-hole graph are particularly eye-catching.

Indeed, this title shines aesthetically. The images are varied and well chosen, and the authors have clearly worked hard to collate photos that ensure all different plumages and behaviours are well represented for each species, as well as welcome habitat shots. The illustrations (the majority of which were done by Dr Winfried Daunicht) are wonderful, too, with the Tengmalm's Owl facial expressions and Barn Owl capture sequence standing out.

Interestingly, each species account ends with a key questions section, in which the authors pose the most pressing unknowns about each owl. This is not something typical of a factual tome like this, but I found it fascinating. Ultimately, there is still much for us to learn.

Owls of Europe ends with a determining characteristics chart. It is a fittingly succinct and clear ending to a title I was left overly impressed with. With this publication, authors Wolfgang Scherzinger and Theodor Mebs have taken Mikkola's owl-authority baton and ran with it. ***Ed Stubbs***

More info

Bookshop from £55

- *Owls of Europe: Biology, Identification and Conservation* by Wolfgang Scherzinger and Theodor Mebs (Bloomsbury, 2024).
- 416 pages, more than 300 photos and illustrations.
- ISBN: 9781399410793. Hbk, £60.

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THIS MONTH'S PANEL

AMY ROBJOHNS is a patchbirder, ecologist and Assistant Recorder for the Hampshire Ornithological Society.

MATT PHELPS has spent the best part of 15 years working in various forms of land management, including as a head gardener.

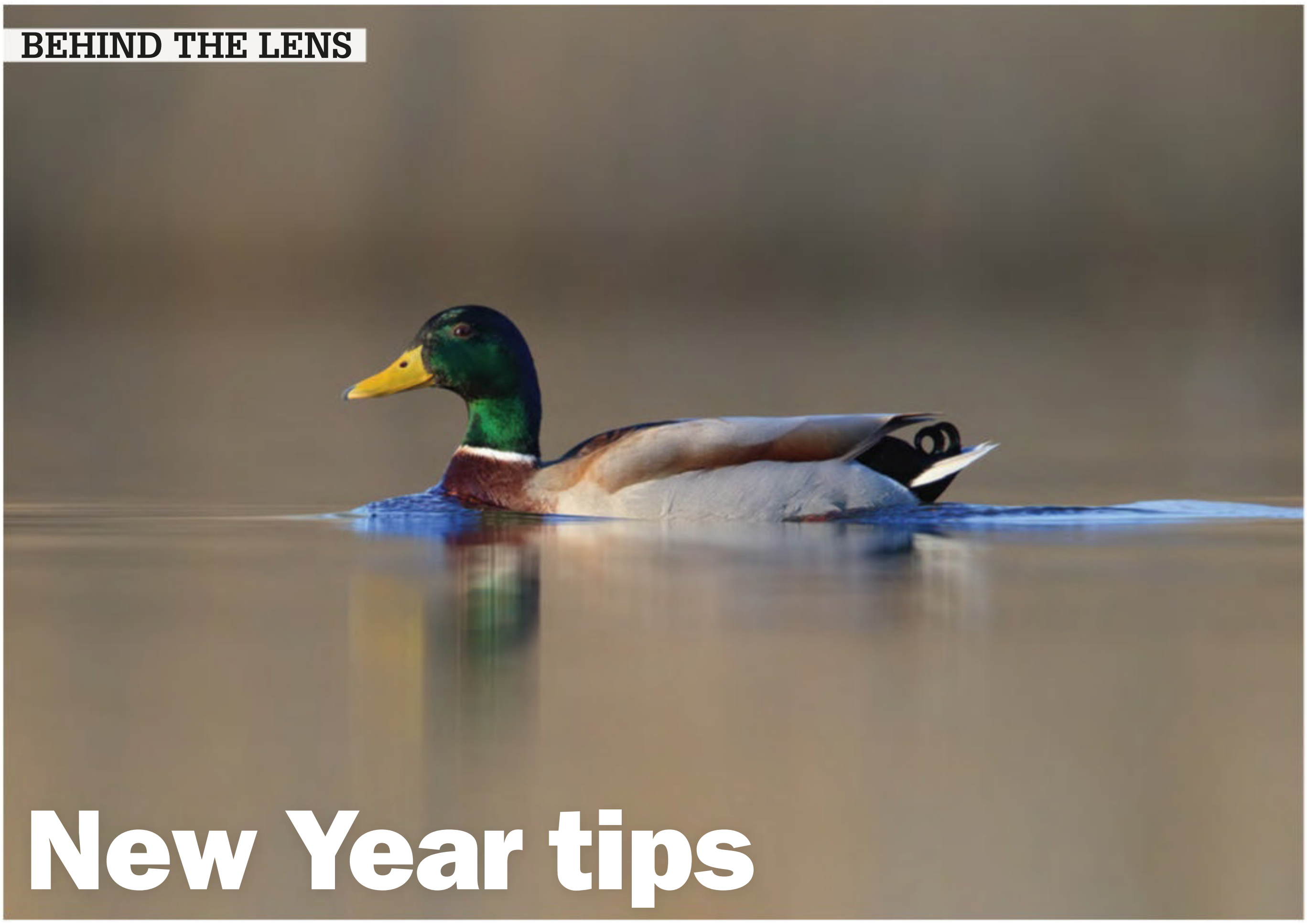
KIT DAY is a Suffolk-based birder who has been photographing wildlife at home and abroad for more than two decades.

CHRIS HARBARD spent many years at the RSPB and is now a tour leader, writer and editor. He lives in Arizona, USA, and travels widely.

KEITH BETTON is a writer, speaker and Chairman of the Hampshire Ornithological Society. He is a highly experienced world birder.

BEHIND THE LENS

New Year tips



Even a very simple portrait image of the familiar and widespread Mallard looks quite wonderful when framed on a calm day in some golden winter sunshine.

ALL PHOTOS: KIT DAY

ALTHOUGH it can sometimes be hard to find the motivation to get out with the camera in the all-too-often dreary conditions of the UK midwinter, January is the perfect time to get back to basics and give your bird photography a new-year boost. Here are my top five tips.

Focus on close birds

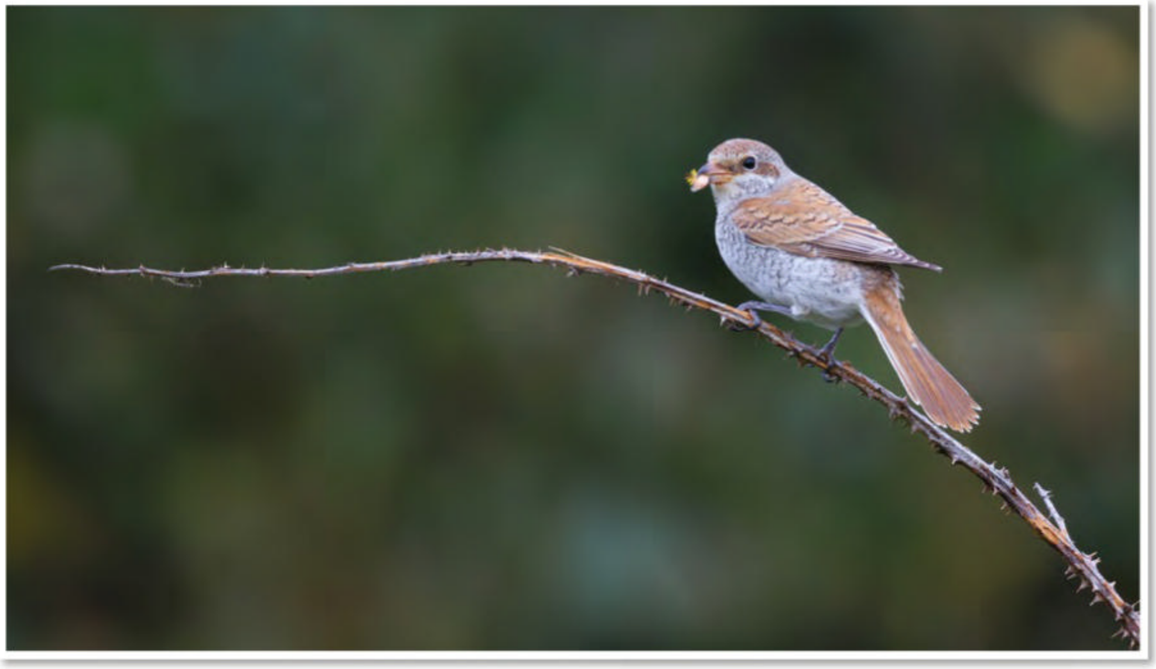
A common saying among bird photographers is that 'you can never have too much reach', but even the biggest lens with a teleconverter is no substitute for being close to the subject. The closer the bird, the less atmospheric interference there is, and the better your chances of a sharp and detailed image. You're also more likely to be able to isolate the bird from any surrounding distractions when it is close; a smooth and clean background can make for a very effective image.

Crop with care

If you can't get close enough to the subject (a common problem in the UK, where birds are so often shy) you can still take lovely images. A good bird photo doesn't have to be a frame-filler. Rather than cropping right in and exposing flaws in image quality, include some more habitat in the shot and think about the composition. Remember the rule of thirds; give the bird some space in front of it to 'look into'.

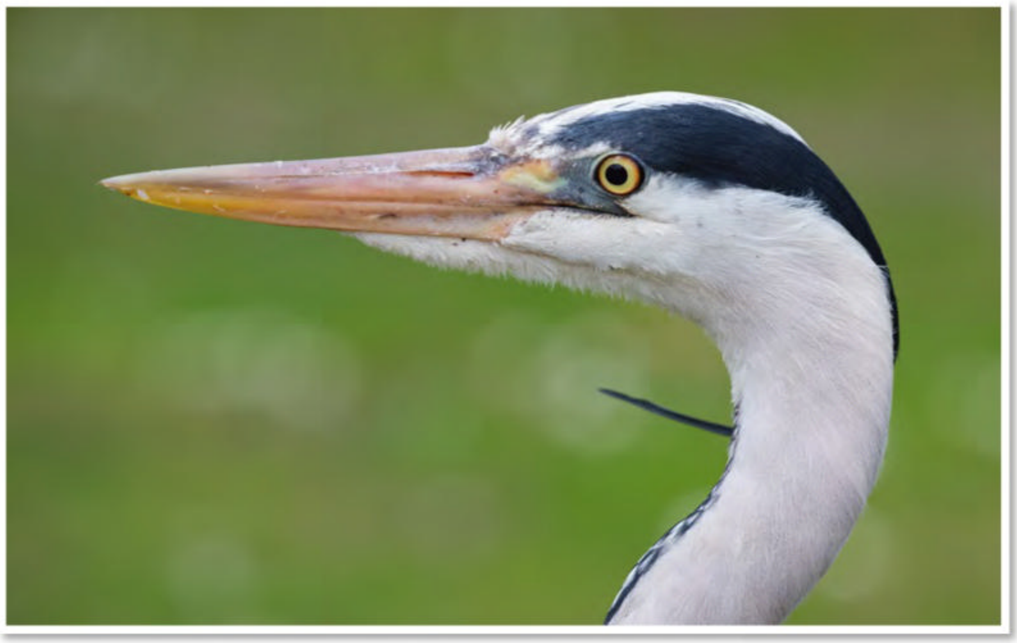
Light conditions

Light is important, but not the be all and end all. Sure, some



Left: When the light is poor it's tempting to leave the camera behind or just stay in altogether. Thankfully, though, I had it with me on a dull afternoon in October for an excellent performance by this Red-backed Shrike. ISO 1250 for 1/640 of a second almost froze the bird's movement as it leapt up on top of the bramble, brandishing a shieldbug. I prefer the composition provided by a fairly minimal crop. This includes the whole perch and avoids any risk of showing off the noise or slight softness.

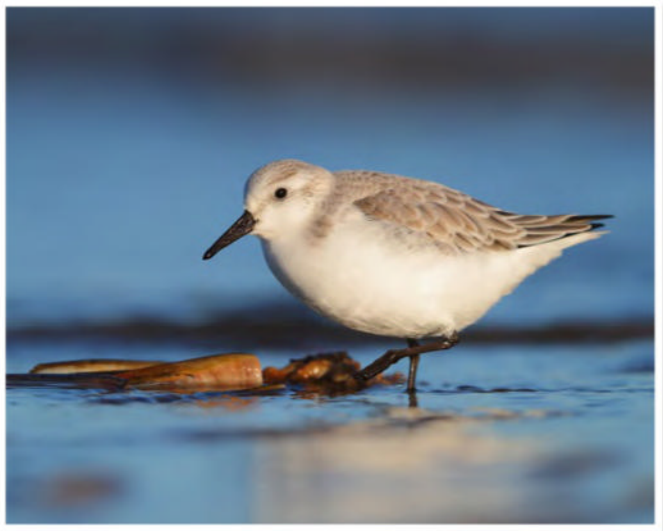
Right: There's no substitute for getting close to the subject if you want to see plenty of feather detail. Some species allow a closer approach than others, but feeding stations, nature-reserve hides and places where birds are more used to people – such as this Grey Heron in a London park – will help your chances.



golden light can transform even the simplest photo of the most familiar bird into a thing of beauty, and sunshine is particularly important for flight shots and scenarios when the background is sky. But if you wait for perfect conditions in the UK then you won't spend much time in the field at all, and the high-ISO image quality from modern cameras is so good that you can take great shots in almost any light conditions. For me it's more important to avoid harsh midday sunshine when the longer days of spring and summer finally return.

Get to the bird's level
Always try to get as close as you can to the height of the bird. If it's on the ground, try to get lower down for a more intimate view of life from the bird's perspective; if your camera has a flippy screen this is a great way to get a lower angle without having to thrust yourself into the sodden grass or mud. If the bird is up in the treetops, stand tall and consider moving further back to improve the angle – a photograph majoring on the bird's vent and undertail coverts is not ideal!

Need for (shutter) speed
Taking sharp images of active birds with a super-telephoto lens isn't easy. In the days before image stabilisers, it was recommended that your shutter speed should match the focal length of the lens (for example, 1/500th of a second if using a 500-mm lens). With improved image stabilisation in both lenses and cameras, we can get away with much lower speeds nowadays, but don't be afraid to raise the ISO if you're struggling to freeze the bird's movement, in order to take any lens shake out of the equation. Modern noise-reduction software can perform miracles, stripping away the noise and leaving behind feather detail, so you're much better off having a sharp but noisy image than a relatively clean but blurry one.
Kit Day



Above: A low angle made all the difference to this shot of a winter-plumaged Sanderling on a local beach.

PHOTO TARGET ... JANUARY

Goldfinch

KIT DAY

During winter, flocks of finches gather and can reach impressive sizes by January, especially if the weather has been cold. This makes it a fantastic time to try and get some top shots of Goldfinch, which is one of our most colourful and gregarious species.

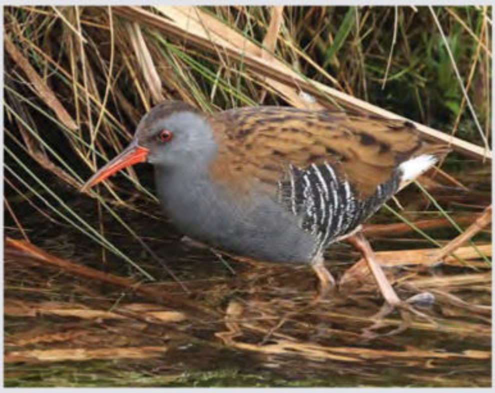
JANUARY is an excellent time to photograph many of our residents and winter visitors. In contrast to many other species, Goldfinch has enjoyed a strong increase in population over the past couple of decades. It wasn't all that long ago that it was far outnumbered by Greenfinch in my garden, but the fortunes of these two species have really switched in more recent times.

Goldfinch is a stunning bird in any light conditions. As long as you get the exposure right, a Goldfinch will glow even on a dull winter's day. Just be careful not to overexpose and lose detail in the bright white patches on the wings and face.

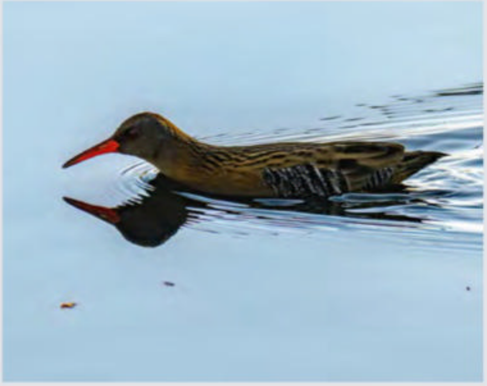
Of course, a garden feeding station provides the perfect opportunity to get close to many species, and Goldfinches will happily attach themselves like limpets to sunflower and nyjer seed feeders. Sprinkling some nyjer seed onto a photogenic perch such as a teasel head can help get them off the unsightly feeders and improve the photos no end. Try adding some perches nearby; there are often not enough feeding ports to cater for an entire flock, so some individuals will be forced to wait their turn. This can also result in squabbles breaking out. It's not easy, but if you have some decent light, go for a high shutter speed and try to nail the action. ***Kit Day***

YOUR PHOTOS

Water Rail



BRIAN CARTWRIGHT



ANDY THOMPSON

IT was terrific to see so many top photos of Water Rail submitted by *Birdwatch* readers. Despite being notoriously shy, this diminutive rallid seems to be a popular subject! Among the photos shared with us were the two printed here. The first of these was taken by Brian Cartwright at his local patch of Anton Lakes, Hampshire, where evidently the species has a tendency to show unusually well. Brian sent in a nice selection of photos, including one of a rail predating a small fish, but this classic portrait captures just about every plumage feature perfectly in nice, neutral light conditions.

The second image, taken by Andy Thompson, shows a swimming Water Rail. Such encounters are generally fleeting as the rails don't particularly like being out in the open and exposed like this, so Andy did well to freeze the action as this individual hurried on its way. The millpond-calm water really makes this image, as it creates a delightful reflection of the bird, while the 'bow waves' behind the rail break the mirror-like state of the water surface.

If you'd like to see your images featured in the magazine, don't forget to email them to us at **editorial@birdwatch.co.uk** or simply upload them to the BirdGuides gallery (**birdguides.com/upload**). ■

IN THE GARDEN

A fresh start

ED STUBBS

Late winter bulbs, such as these Snowdrops, provide a very useful source of nectar when they begin to flower towards the end of January as spring gradually approaches.

MATT PHELPS

January is a good time to install nestboxes. If you've got room, consider a kestrel box.

ED STUBBS

Leaving apples out on your lawn may entice winter thrushes such as Fieldfare into your garden.

JANUARY is month of new beginnings: resolutions and commitments to either give up a vice or take up a new hobby. In the garden and the wider natural environment, January marks the true middle of winter, and it can feel as though everything is at its most lifeless as we start the new year, with spring an awfully long way away. I prefer to think of it as a fresh start; the year returning full circle, as the festival of new life begins to stir its cogs beneath the surface.

Hopefully you have heeded my advice from previous columns in this magazine and not tidied up *too* much around your flowerbeds and the corners of your garden. If so, don't be tempted to do anything major just yet, but do take a moment this month to gently scrape back a few leaves from the surface and you might see the fresh green spikes of spring bulbs just beginning to poke their heads through the topsoil. On bright days, you may even see a hardy Red Admiral or Buff-tailed Bumblebee emerging from their slumber in search of nectar sources. Do you have many (any) flowering plants in your garden now? If not, it's a good time of year to look at what's missing. Hardy, winter-flowering shrubs such as Winter-flowering Honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*), Winter Jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) and Sweet Box (*Sarcococca confusa*) are all worth considering adding if you have space for them. Late winter bulbs such as Winter Aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*) and Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) provide useful sources of nectar too, though it's too late to plant them now. Nonetheless, it's a good idea to make a note of the gaps and opportunities and act upon them later in the year.

January is a good time to check, clean and repair any bird boxes you might have in your garden. It's also not too late to install some new ones. If you have the space to do so, consider putting up a kestrel box. If you've got suitable habitat around you, you might be surprised how quickly a pair can move in!

If you feed the birds that visit your garden then make sure you keep it up through this coldest time of the year, especially if we do get proper cold spells. If there's snow on the ground for any length of time, putting out some apples in your garden can be a sure-fire way to attract Redwings and Fieldfares in to feast on them. Also be sure to keep providing a ready supply of clean, unfrozen water for birds to drink and bathe in. Don't be tempted to bash holes in frozen ponds, though, as most species living in it at this time of year have evolved to cope with a bit of freezing.

Continuing the theme of last month's column, where I talked about having a go at something of a 'garden big year' in 2025, it's also worth stating the obvious here: if you don't already record your garden birds and other wildlife, then it's well worth doing so. Apart from being a really fun thing to do, bringing the excitement of new species of all taxa, adding to your list as they arrive, it can also form a really important strand of citizen science. Gardens make up a huge area of land in the UK (almost half a million hectares, or a fifth of the landmass of Wales) and if even 10% of gardeners diligently recorded the wildlife in their gardens, we would amass a wealth of interesting data on the fortunes of a host of birds, insects and other species utilising these spaces. ***Matt Phelps***

ON THE PATCH

Remembering … January

JAKE GEARTY

This cracking Snow Bunting got Amy's 2017 patch year list off to a flying start. Having arrived in December 2016, it lingered into the New Year, allowing her to see it on the first day of January.

THIS year, I'm going to recall some favourite patch memories each month, in turn hoping to inspire you to get into the field locally as a result. My patch is Titchfield Haven NNR – a small reserve covering most of the lower Meon Valley in Hampshire – and the surrounding coast and farmland. It is approximately 3 sq km in size to fit with the recently revived Patchwork Challenge. Despite its size, there's a nice range of habitats and I've recorded 234 species of birds since 2014, with many wonderful memories and exciting finds.

January usually begins with a 'big day' to kick-start the patch year list and to see if any noteworthy species from December have hung around. In 2017, a lovely Snow Bunting lingered for a few more weeks, and other 1 January highlights have included European Shag (strangely scarce here), Long-tailed Duck and Velvet Scoter. For a while, the sea between Hill Head and Calshot attracted good-sized winter flocks of Common Scoter and Common Eider that were joined at times by scarcer duck. It was always interesting to search through the gatherings in case of something different. Sadly, the Common Scoter have largely vanished. The eider are wonderful to hear since they began coming closer to shore at low tide.

Winter seawatching is mixed with strong south-westerlies sometimes bringing storm-driven birds, cold north-easterlies yielding patch gold such as fly-by Common Goldeneye (I've only seen two on my patch!) and calm days perfect for scanning the sea for duck, grebes and divers. One such January day once yielded an impressive 235 Great Crested Grebes, while other days over the years have included all three commoner divers and sometimes Slavonian and Black-necked Grebes. An enjoyable stormy seawatching day came on 3 January 2024, after Storm Henk had passed. There was a near-constant movement of auks and a smaller passage of Kittiwakes. I suppose this is closer to a 'standard' seawatch for many coastal birders, but to me it made a welcome change from poor seawatches in strong south-westerlies.

My local patch extends north to Titchfield village, where the churchyard overlooks part of the floodplain and canal path. I keep thinking the yew trees could hold a Hawfinch – perhaps this year! In 2024 it was pleasing to find a Siberian Chiffchaff among the Common Chiffchaffs in the churchyard in mid-January. While watching it and a Water Pipit on subsequent days, I was pleasantly surprised to find Green Sandpiper (usually a passage bird) and a good mix of duck species away from the main floods.

Two unexpected January highlights in years gone by were a Greater Yellowlegs in 2015 and 2024's Ferruginous Duck, both of which were found by fellow local birders. I'd risked not checking my patch on those days, with the one in 2015 being a day mostly set aside for revision, and last year a rare venture off patch to dip some local Crossbills … Thankfully both rarities stayed until I was able to arrive and the Greater Yellowlegs made a lovely break from my studies. Little did I know it would reappear three months later and linger until July with godwits. It goes to show that almost anything can happen if you put the time in.

Finally, another January highlight was six Greater Scaup in 2017. I was volunteering at Frampton Marsh RSPB when news broke, so I was very pleased when they were still present eight days later during a trip home! ***Amy Robjohns***

AMY ROBJOHNS

This flock of Greater Scaup was another memorable January patch record for Amy in 2017.

AMY ROBJOHNS

Amy found this Siberian Chiffchaff among Common Chiffchaffs in a churchyard on her Hampshire patch last January.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

WIKIMEDIA

White-browed Sparrow-Weavers can build up to 60 nests, although only some are used for breeding or roosting.

Ruling the roost

IN winter, a safe and warm roosting place is essential for a bird's survival. A roost can simply be a place to rest, in the case of waders at high tide, while for many diurnal species it is a place where they can sleep for many hours at a time. During the Arctic summer, when the sun does not set at all, birds tend to sleep in short periods at different times of the day and the overall length of time they spend sleeping is much reduced. Birds at lower latitudes, where it still gets dark at night, spend more time asleep. This suggests that birds do not need much sleep at all, and in fact are forced to sleep simply because it is dark. This may explain why European Robins will readily sing at night where there are streetlamps or other artificial light.

Different families of birds will have different roosting strategies. Some will form flocks, while others roost individually. Shelter may take the form of leaves on a branch, but many species prefer to be well insulated from the elements. Cavity-nesting birds will usually also roost in a cavity, not necessarily the same one, except in the case of incubating birds during the breeding season. Great Spotted Woodpeckers, for example, will use old nest cavities – if none are available then they may excavate a fresh cavity, and they will also use nestboxes. Great and Blue Tits also like to use nestboxes, tending to do so as individuals, but occasionally with two birds together. Nuthatches are solitary, while treecreepers roost in bark crevices or cavities in decaying wood and may roost communally. In Europe, House and Tree Sparrows will often roost in White Stork nests, and Tree Sparrows will build a special nest-like structure for roosting inside nestboxes, usually on top of a nest used for breeding. Some species may change their roosting site during the winter, and studies of nestboxes have shown several different species using one box, alternating occasionally. When choosing a nestbox to roost in, birds will tend to avoid boxes which contain a lot of ectoparasites.

Many weaver species will roost in their communal nests and recent research has shown that one species, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, has a large extended family, with just one dominant pair using the nest to breed in. The other helpers will build multiple roosting structures close by. Amazingly, different families build different-shaped roosting structures, with distinct architectural styles noted within each family group. The roosting tubes can be short or long, with entrance and exit holes, and a shape roughly like an inverted 'U' but with differing angles, all of which determine its final design. ***Chris Harbard***

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Song skills

Research has shown that Grey Catbird is one of the bird species with the most advanced vocal learning skills. It is a particularly excellent mimic and has a large brain size relative to its body.

ED STUBBS

CORVIDS are renowned for their intelligence, but what about other species? Recent research looked at 23 bird species (mostly songbirds) and tested them with problem-solving challenges such as removing a lid, piercing some foil or pulling a stick to retrieve some food. Another test measured how quickly birds associated a colour with a particular food, and then how rapidly they adapted when the colour changed. These results were then correlated with the vocal learning abilities of each species.

It was found that bird species with the most advanced vocal-learning skills were the best at problem solving. Three species stood out: Common Starling, Blue Jay and Grey Catbird. In contrast, two indistinct songsters, Eastern Phoebe and Mourning Dove, performed the worst of all. These former three also had the largest brains relative to the size of their bodies and all of them are excellent mimics. As one of the functions of birdsong is to attract a mate and a male bird with a large repertoire is always favoured by a female, then this research suggests that making this choice will result in getting not just the fittest mate, but the smartest as well.

When thinking about bird brains and what they can do, it is tempting to draw comparisons with mammals, even humans. But structurally, birds' brains are very different. A small bird, such as Goldcrest, weighs about 10% of an average mouse, but when you compare the two brains, the bird has more than double the number of neurons. A parrot brain has more than 3 billion neurons, which is comparable to a small monkey, and packed into a smaller brain they might even function more quickly.

Smart birders like to identify birds by ear, and learning bird songs and calls enables them to do this. Recognising the sequences of notes and phrases in each different vocalisation enables them to distinguish between species. Interestingly, the way we hear their songs seems to be of little importance to the birds themselves. Recent research into the songs of Zebra Finches has revealed that they pay more attention to the texture of the individual sounds rather than the sequence of notes that make up a song. Rearranging the notes in a song did not affect a bird's reaction to it, while changing the timbre of a syllable made all the difference, showing that birds clearly hear and interpret sounds differently to birders. ***Chris Harbard***

ORNITHOLOGY

'Vocal dialogue' noted between Tawny and Ural Owls in Russia

VOCAL interactions between Tawny and Ural Owls have been recorded in Russia.

Owls have generally far-carrying advertising calls used to attract a mate and communicate the boundaries of territories. In some cases, owls deliver calls in interactions with other species.

Tawny Owl is a rare species in the Russian Republic of Mordovia in the Middle Volga region, where small numbers are found in deciduous and mixed forests. In recent years, the larger Ural Owl has become established in the area. This species can outcompete Tawny Owl for prey items and has even been known to predate the smaller owl.

Sound recorders were used in various locations in Mordovia from 2009 in an effort to analyse owl vocalisations and interactions between the two species.

Analysis revealed co-vocalisation between Ural Owl and Tawny Owl during the incubation period for both species in April. It only occurred between 9 pm and 10 pm, with Tawny Owl delivering the first calls and Ural Owl starting to vocalise in response. During periods of co-vocalisation, Tawny Owl delivered twice as many calls as Ural Owl.

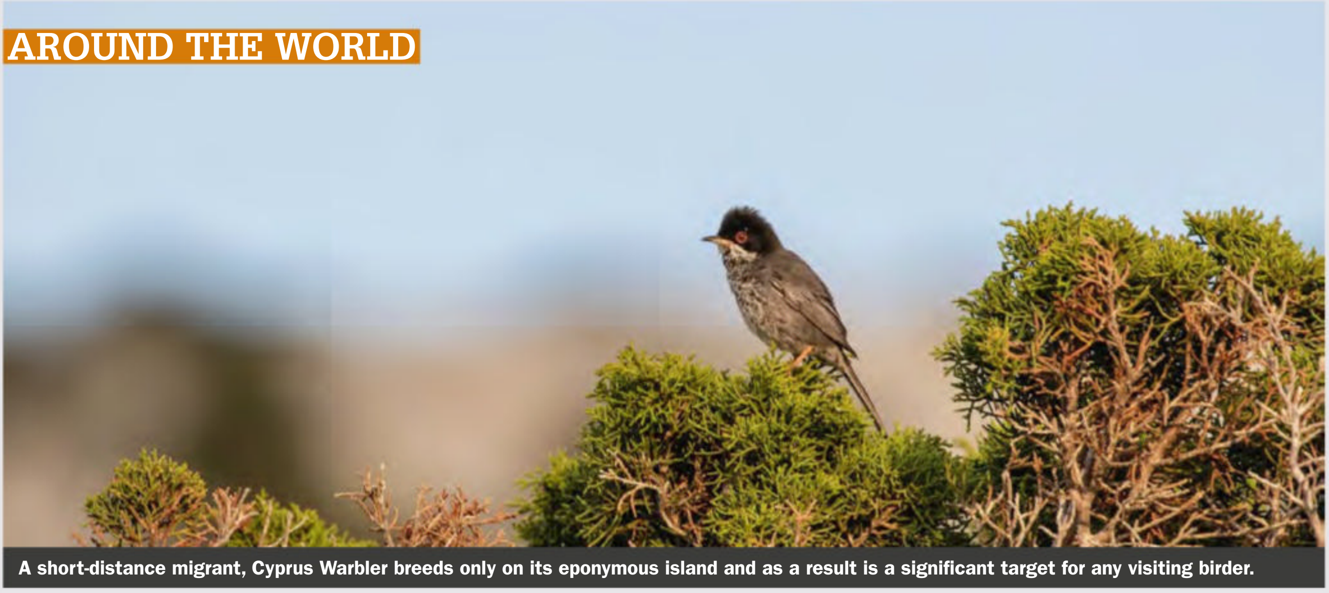
A pattern emerged in which Tawny Owl stopped calling soon after Ural Owl vocalisations were recorded, with the latter species going on to give a further series of calls.

The smaller species may concede to Ural Owl during such exchanges due to the possible danger this more powerful species poses, leading it to avoid further detection by its competitor and potential predator. In most recordings, Tawny Owl only resumed calling 30 minutes after Ural Owl vocalisations were last heard.

Alexey Andreychev, from National Research Mordovia State University and author of the study, said that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the dynamics behind the interactions but it does seem to demonstrate vocal communication between the two owl species, despite their competitive relationship. They say further studies are needed to better understand the nature of the apparent exchanges between Tawny and Ural Owls.

Reference

Andreychev, A. 2024. Vocal interaction between Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) and Ural Owl (*Strix uralensis*) in the Middle Volga. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 510, p.03011.



SAM JONES

A short-distance migrant, Cyprus Warbler breeds only on its eponymous island and as a result is a significant target for any visiting birder.

Cyprus

CYPRUS covers an area that is slightly smaller than Devon and Cornwall combined and constitutes the third-largest island in the Mediterranean. At its closest it is 70 km from Turkey and 100 km from Israel. Its position in the eastern Mediterranean makes it an ideal stop-over location for migrants, and as such it has been popular with visiting birders for many years. It supports some 90 breeding species, of which three are endemic. Cyprus Wheatear is absent in the winter, moving to north-east Africa. Some Cyprus Warblers are known to winter along the Red Sea coast, but the species can be seen on the island in any month, as can Cyprus Scops Owl. The last species is suspected to be a partial migrant, although evidence to confirm this is thin.

There are 34 Important Bird Areas across the island, but most visitors focus their time on the southern part of Cyprus. Paphos makes an excellent base for birding in the west, with the nearby Paphos Headland offering good chances to find migrants in late March or early April. Similarly, the coast at Mandria can be good. Not far away, Asprokremnos Dam is a lake covering 2 sq km which attracts migrants. The Akrotiri peninsula, some 20 km to the east, has a large salt lake, plus several marshes and gravel pits, all of which support both breeding and migrating waders. There are hides available for viewing. However, if you choose to stay further east in or near Larnaca your first stop should be to Cape Greco, which is a renowned migrant trap. Larnaca also has a salt lake, while other nearby sites include Oroklini Lake and Akhna Dam.

All three of the endemic breeders can be found fairly easily in spring, although actually seeing Cyprus Scops Owl may take some time. In addition, it is worth making sure that you see the Cypriot forms of Coal Tit, Jay and Short-toed Treecreeper – all of which can be found on the forested slopes of the Troodos Mountains.

There is a supporting cast of Mediterranean breeding species, of which Black Francolin, Spur-winged Lapwing, Masked Shrike, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Cretzschmar's and Black-headed Buntings are strong reminders of the island's easterly location. However, many birders visit with migration in mind and passage species can include Baillon's and Little Crakes, Collared and Semicollared Flycatchers, Eastern Bonelli's, Eastern Subalpine, Eastern Orphean and Rüppell's Warblers, and Eastern Black-eared, Isabelline and Finsch's Wheatears (the last being a winter visitor). Against this wealth of birdlife, it is tragic that the island's human population still traps more than 400,000 migrating songbirds each year. Despite campaigns to stop the killing, this traditional pastime continues, although thankfully now at lower levels than at the turn of the century.

Getting there: There are direct flights to Larnaca and Paphos from UK airports with fares as low as £100 return in March-April if booked early.

Recommended book: *Collins Bird Guide* by Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström. Collins. 2022. £30 (hardback), £20 (softback). *The Birds of Cyprus: An Annotated Checklist* by Peter Flint and Colin Richardson. British Ornithologists' Club. 2024. £45.

Area (% of UK):	9,250 sq km (4%)
Country checklist:	407
Country endemics:	three species
Best time to visit:	March-April and September
Target for a trip:	150 species (one week)

KAROLINA LUBRYCZYNSKA

Situated in the far south-east of Cyprus, Cape Greco is a major migrant trap and birding hot-spot.

Key species: Cyprus Warbler
13.5 cm. Somewhat similar to Sardinian Warbler (which is also present on Cyprus), but has greyish scalloping on the underparts. It breeds in scrub and agricultural areas up to 1,400 m. As a partial migrant some remain on breeding grounds in winter and others move to the coast, but the majority migrate to north-east Africa. It is common in suitable habitats. The population could be as high as 140,000 pairs, but numbers have declined in areas that have been recently colonised by Sardinian Warbler. ***Keith Betton***

your letters & photos

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Global Birdfair and climate

LIKE Stephen Moss, I am a long-standing fan of the Birdfair and recognise many of its benefits that he identified in his recent column (*Birdwatch* 389: 55). However, the sad fact is that the support that some wildlife tours provide for local ecolodges and guides pales into insignificance when compared to the threats from the dangerous climate change that we are currently heading towards. Air travel is a major and growing contributor to this, and is not significantly diminished by carbon-offsetting schemes. Besides, we are on shaky and potentially hypocritical ground to justify environmental damage on the basis of livelihoods and raising money for conservation.

It's time for the Global Birdfair to fully acknowledge the climate emergency, take sustainability issues seriously and diversify further. This will also be good for it in the long run and hopefully entice the Wildlife Trusts, BTO, WWT and others to return. ***Graham Tucker***

Illicit affairs

THE Hastings Rarities scandal is, as David Campbell explains (*Birdwatch* 389: 26-29), 'Britain's most infamous case of ornithological fraud'. In the early 2000s, I spoke at length with James Ferguson-Lees about the affair. Later, in my social history of birdwatching, *A Bird in the Bush* (Aurum 2004), I tentatively named Michael Nicoll as the man behind the fraud. After publication, James told me that, in his view, my suspicions were correct.

There is one other extraordinary aspect to the story, which sets the Hastings Rarities apart from other celebrated frauds such as Piltdown Man and numerous cases in the art world. Unlike them, the fraud did not involve fakery: as David notes, the specimens involved are absolutely genuine, and can still be seen in Brighton's Booth Museum. The deception lay not in their identity, but their provenance – the fact that they had supposedly been obtained in Britain, which hugely increased their value to gullible collectors. ***Stephen Moss***

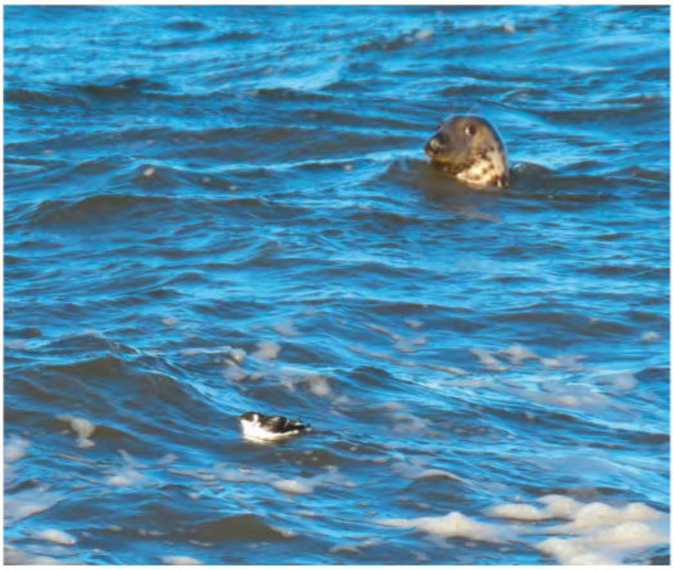
Sightings at sea

I really enjoyed the interesting article on the North Sea Bird Club by Andrew Thorpe in the October issue (*Birdwatch* 388: 44-47), which brought back memories from 1966.

While serving on the survey ship HMS *Vidal* we were dispatched into the North Atlantic to look for Sergeant Chay Blyth and Captain John Ridgway, who were rowing across the Atlantic to the UK.

Contact had been lost with the rowers during the aftermath of a hurricane. We did not find the rowers but our ship provided a welcome resting place for a tired Merlin. At that time, black-and-white was the general medium for photography.

Incidentally, the rowers arrived safely back in the UK on 3 September 1966. ***Brian Cartwright***



PAUL WILLIAMS WRITES: *"I thought you might like this picture of a Little Auk being watched by a Grey Seal, about 40 m off the beach at Cley, Norfolk, on 21 November 2024."*

Unfounded criticism

I wanted to respond Lucy McRobert's column (*Birdwatch* 389: 78). I am of mature years and, having once been a very keen birder, am these days much more laid back about our hobby.

Over the years I have always enjoyed Lucy's writing and her observations of those around her; she has style and character, and many a time she has made me chuckle. Her skill should not be underestimated and the experiences she has had from intense, boorish male birders will, I am sure, be familiar to many of us. I hope that any guilty parties reading the article will take note.

Lucy, being a young woman, has much to put up with from the poorer male specimens in our society, but she is such a valuable member of your team. I, for one, applaud her and love reading her articles. ***Richard Vasey***

Money talk

ALTHOUGH I have little time for the 'fluffy duck and cake' shops that pass for reserve centres, some sort of visitor reception is clearly helpful.

I am disturbed, though, at the reference to the financial viability of nature reserves (*Birdwatch* 390: 78). How do we economically evaluate the protection of threatened habitats and endangered species? Does the RSPB actually mean the financial viability of visitor centres?

I am wondering how much this situation has to do with other factors – big-money CEOs recruited from industry with a different way of thinking, David Cameron's 'big society', which reduced the financial input from government, and the loss of EU assistance through Brexit. I think we should be told. ***David Armitage***

WITHOUT fail, I always open each edition of *Birdwatch* from the back and read Lucy McRobert's column first. I have met Lucy several times while holidaying in the Isles of Scilly (including at the Blackburnian Warbler). However, following her comments in the December 2024 issue, I must confess to have commissioned at least two pizza ovens. Part of my day job, as the manager of a city farm and several community gardens in urban Sheffield, is to get young people outdoors and, among other things, growing and cooking their own food. Constructing and cooking a personalised pizza inspires far more than soups, stews and salads!
John Le Corney

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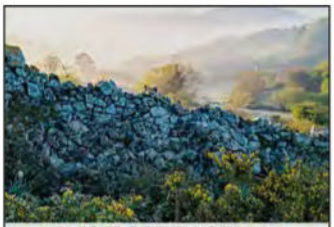

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February

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■ **New world order** With the recent news that a unified global bird taxonomy is planned, Alex Berryman takes a look at what changes birders can expect in the months and years ahead.

■ **Smart money** Revelations that the RSPB is to cut spending through the closure of some reserve facilities came as a surprise. Lucy McRobert investigates what is going on at the UK's leading bird-conservation charity.

■ **2024 in review** It was another year of extreme rarities and fascinating influxes, not least involving huge numbers of seabirds. Sam Viles looks back on an action-packed 12 months for British and Irish birders.

■ **Birders' Choice Awards: the results** We reveal the winners of this year's awards, including your conservation heroes, rarity of the year and top birding products.

■ **Strolling around Stronsay** Jake Gearty reflects on an autumn birding adventure to one of Orkney's least-visited islands.

■ **Slender hope lost** Following the announcement that Slender-billed Curlew has officially been declared extinct, Arnoud van den Berg recounts searching for the species in its final winter stronghold of Morocco.

■ **Seeing 'smiths'** In this month's ID feature, Josh Jones looks in detail at first-winter American Herring Gull, offering tips on where to search for this rare but probably overlooked transatlantic visitor.

PLUS: **the BirdGuides team provides detailed summaries of December's birding highlights, entertaining comment from our columnists, all the latest news, views and reviews, tips to enhance your birding knowledge, and our editorial team responds to your questions.**

February issue on sale 23 January 2025

LUCY MCROBERT

Mega minefield

Was the Yorkshire tanager an escape? And why did news of the Booted Eagle in the Chilterns go out late? Our columnist ponders these questions and what they say about Britain's birding community.

I haven't twitched for what seems like an age now. Life, the universe and everything have intervened. To protect myself from the grip factor, I've even temporarily stopped getting bird news to my phone. I'm reliant on my boyfriend and social media for rarity news, and that's how the Scarlet Tanager in West Yorkshire flickered through my consciousness.

My interest was piqued. I could potentially go in a few days' time, but as the horror stories rolled in, I realised that there was little I would like to do less than drive two hours to stand, bored and self-conscious in a cul-de-sac, staring at the treetops while hoping for a split-second view. I would have missed it anyway; I am impatient and restless. I like to prowl, scan, wander, search. To those that did see it, I'm not criticising. I admire your dedication. In any case, the bird wasn't seen the day I could have gone, so I made the right decision.

The Scarlet Tanager was immediately controversial. Found by non-birders, it was hard to see, in a built-up area and raised a lot of questions: where, what, why and how exactly? For those who saw it, it was (is) imperative that the bird is accepted as genuinely wild, fresh in from the US. Others seem equally intent on dismissing it as an escape (perhaps, in some cases, to justify their decision not to twitch it).

The most thoughtful contribution came from Alex Lees, chair of the BOU Records Committee, who wrote a detailed analysis of the bird's possible origin. He wasn't trying to ruin anyone's fun, but merely presenting an analysis of the facts in a scientific manner. And that's when the birding-web lost its mind. 'Hope the death threats stop soon, Alex,' someone quipped. What struck me was how neutral Alex remained throughout; if anything, I thought he seemed quite optimistic that the bird could be wild by the end of it. A record of a Red-eyed Vireo in Stockholm, Sweden, within a few days made the debate even more interesting.

HEP CAIRNSWOOD

The Scarlet Tanager was one of the most popular birds of the autumn. But was it an escape?

Late eagle news

Another bird that had caught my eye was the Booted Eagle in the Chilterns a week previous. It was found by well-known and respected birder Alan Lewis, but as he was unable to take a photo through his bins, news was essentially suppressed other than for a few immediate, discreet contacts. 'Who wants to be associated with a record of a fly-over rarity, particularly a Booted Eagle, without tangible proof?' wrote Alan in his finder's account (see page 9). Luckily, the bird was refound within 24 hours, though proved almost as hard to see as the tanager.

I didn't go for either bird, so it is easy for me to be dispassionate. Emotions undoubtedly run high with rarities. But I do wonder where we've got to as a community if one of Britain's most reputable birders can't release news without a photo for fear of not being believed, and the chair of the BOURC can't offer insights into a bird's origins without being treated like he'd stolen someone's beloved puppy. The moral of the story? Don't go on the internet and don't leave home without a camera.

> “If I do ever find something, I'm immediately deleting all my social media accounts”

Luckily, I don't need a camera. I'm not going to find anything myself – not unless it lands in my Leicestershire garden. But then stranger things have happened, including on housing estates in West Yorkshire. Perhaps I do need to invest in a camera after all. A quick recce of local private bird collections might not go amiss, either. And if I do ever find something, I'm immediately deleting all my social media accounts. ■

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